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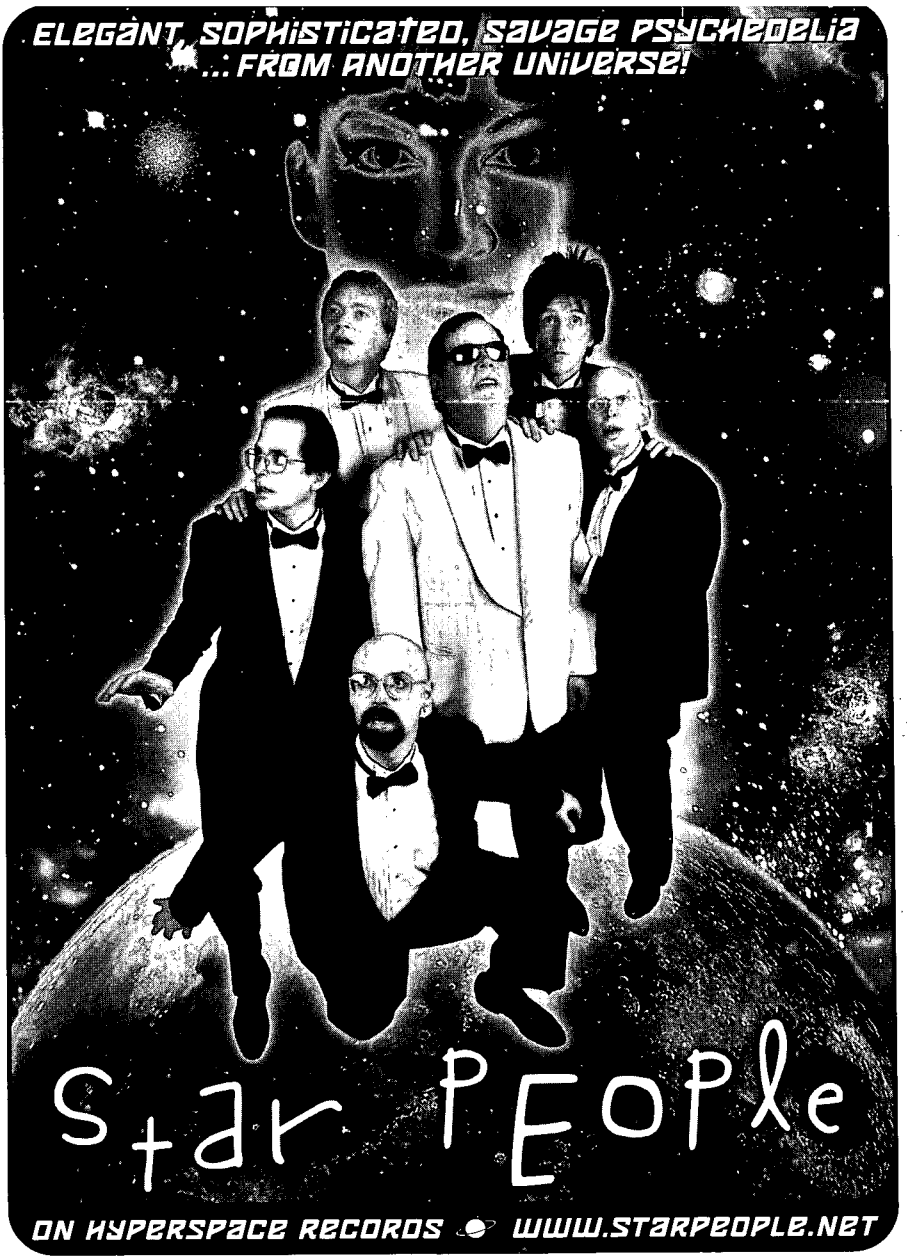

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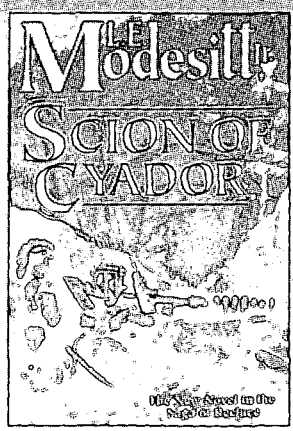

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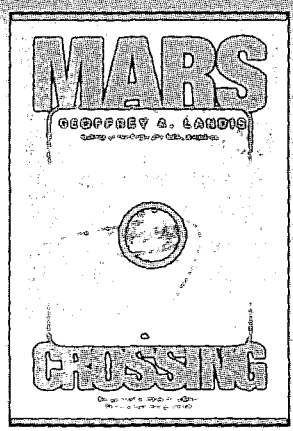

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October/November • 52nd Year of Publication

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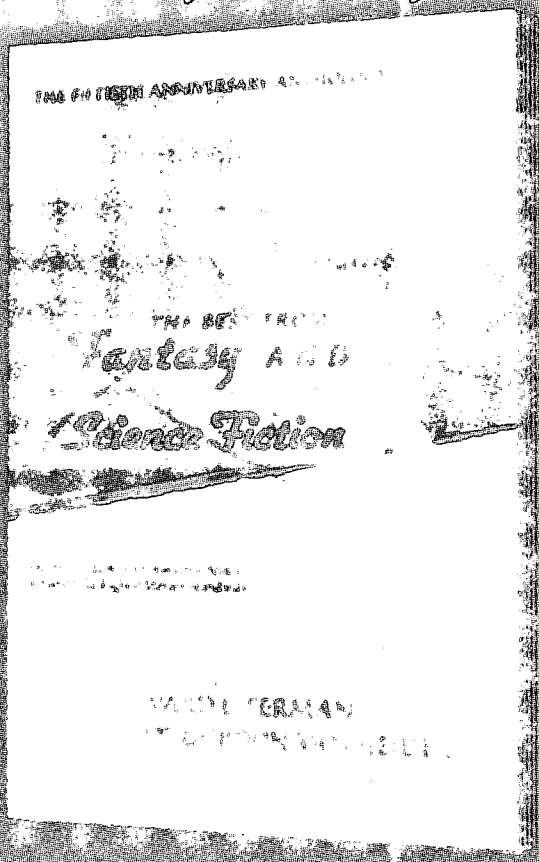

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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

THIS month's stories — especially those by Kate Wilhelm, Lewis Shiner, and Alex Irvine — got me thinking again about one of the questions that has been nagging me for the past year or so:

What ever happened to the mythical omnicompetent man?

I'm sure you remember the guy: he was a good square fellow, an affable everyman who usually held down a fairly unremarkable job. He wasn't any sort of a superhero, had no magical powers, but he was always prepared and always knew the right answer, never took a sick day for health reasons, was always familiar with the latest technology and could still quote obscure lines of sixteenth-century poetry while operating heavy machinery. He was very common in science fiction in the 1940s and '50s — Robert Heinlein wrote about him often. I'd say the early James Bond (before he became infallible) also tapped into this myth (or archetype, if you will).

Where is he now?

One theory is that the women's rights movement in the late 1960s made him see the error of his ways, he discovered that he wasn't actually god's gift to females, and he's now a happy house-husband looking after two kids while his wife shatters glass ceilings.

I think it's more likely, however, that he went into retirement after the Cold War ended. Because to a large extent, the omnicompetent man's greatest attribute wasn't that he could do everything, but that he was *ready* for anything. Lew Shiner's protagonist in "Primes" and the narrator of Alex Irvine's "Intimations of Immortality" never actually encounter anything they can't do...but they're thrown into situations for which they're not prepared. Were he the hero of either story, Mr. Omni would, I think, have had a plan immediately and he would have proceeded without the self-doubts.

Leaders and visionaries tend to

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come to the fore during times of crisis and turmoil; more prosperous times see more introspective and more ironic figures. Captain Kirk strode across the small screen in the mid-to-late 1960s; today we have Tim Allen's spoof of him in *GalaxyQuest*. Is it a reflection of today that so many of this month's stories seem to have characters who are powerless or are able only to react to their circumstances?

I don't know. Keep an eye on this month's characters, see what powers they have and what they're able do against nature. I think there's some trend here just past the edge of my vision, something that amounts to more than just this editor's predilection toward certain types of stories.

If you can set me straight, send a letter — we're now publishing a regular letter column on our Website at www.fsfmag.com. Meanwhile, I hope you find this month's stories good reading.

—GVG

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Carolyn Gilman's last appearance here was the novella "Candle in a Bottle" back in our October 1996 issue. But she has good reasons for her four-year absence, among them:

-she wrote and published her first novel, Halfway Human

-her work as a museum curator has taken her around the United States, tracking down artifacts and manuscripts of those intrepid explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark

-and she assures us she has been working on several stories.

Meantime this new one is certainly worth the wait.

Dreamseed

By Carolyn Ives Gilman

THEY FOUND HIM FIFTEEN years later, exactly where his father had left him, in a box on a tall steel shelf in the warehouse. No one had ever suspected he was there. It was a poorly lit shelf, close to the trusses upholding the corrugated ceiling. For years the forklifts had whirred past his aisle, and to the drivers it had been no more than another cleft between towering ranges, indistinguishable as one day's work from the next.

His rescue was delayed for several weeks, while secret messages passed along the underground grapevine, far from authority's eyes. It made no difference to him; he slept on in the life-sustaining casket that had housed him through childhood and adolescence, oblivious even to the bumps and roars of straining machinery when the warehouse workers finally cleared out the other crates around him, and discreet specialists rode a cherry-picker up to make observations. The coffin still functioned normally as they brushed off the dust; it was fine old craftsmanship. The glowing digital readouts indicated a living human being inside.

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Living. Was it the correct word for a boy who had grown up in an induced state of perpetual sleep? Standing there around the box, his discoverers speculated: What was the rationale for storing him away where he was almost certain to be forgotten? They might have questioned the motive if they had not known the genius of the man responsible. As it was, they reached a guarded consensus: it was a gift from the past to the future.

He gave us his youngest begotten son.

Expectations pressed close, interrupted by gusts of nervous alarm, as they finally loaded the casket onto a forklift and lowered it to the concrete floor. As predicted, the box sensed the motion and activated a new mode. Numbers cycled, compressors purred, and the world entered the box again.

His last memory was this:

Overgrown jungle, humid and teeming. Pushing through leaves, bugs on sticky skin, he comes to a geometric shadow: a gray stone wall, towering over trees, chill, chill, bare dirt below.

Up the stone temple rampway he goes, ant-sized. Beyond the massive wall archaeologists toil — swarming, pick and brush, over a cityscape of towers and walls stretching into underground distance.

A woman with a hat and trowel, an open-sided metal elevator. Down, down, clanking to another level. Here, more buildings lie under floodlight and scaffold, archaeologists scraping away their secret shapes.

Down again, deeper buried, another city — deserted, this one, mazy

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ditches and precarious shorings under weakling lightbulbs straining to push back palpable dark.

"What if the lights go out?" he asks the walkie-talkie man beside him.

"Can you get lost in your mine?" the man replies.

He means *mind*. All dreams are about your mind.

"Aspen?"

It was his name; dream-people often called him that. But it seemed to come from elsewhere, a disturbingly *other* place, a place he couldn't locate.

"Aspen."

There was sensation now, rough and harsh. The archaeologists' floodlights were shining in his eyes, and his face felt like it was wrapped in crinkly cellophane. He was dreaming vividly now, of an external world. He was dreaming of waking.

"Here, let me try," a woman's voice said. Through the caul of plastic wrapping, his lips felt a light brushstroke, and he smelled jacaranda blossoms. A dream-woman was leaning over him, her dark hair a curtain round his bed. He waited to know who she was, but the knowledge didn't come. He only knew she had kissed him.

Sleep had retreated a little way, but still held the back of his mind in a vise-grip. He felt detached, as if he were viewing things on a screen, or at a great distance. The natural thing was to drift back into slumber; only with an effort could he stay in the front of his mind. He wondered if this were really what waking felt like.

"He's awake," the woman said. Her voice was tainted with regret.

"Stand aside," a man said. He had a pale, bland face that looked smoothed over, erased like a soap sculpture left in the shower too long. "Can you sit up, son?"

Hands behind his shoulders raised him; the plastic garment that encased him rustled. Dizzily, he saw the world upright. They helped him

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swing his feet out of the casket, and supported him as he stood on long, coltish legs, weak and wobbly. A gurney wheeled forward, and he was sitting on it. He looked down on his casket from outside — on the hole the shape of his body, with severed tubes and wires lying dead that had once nourished him. It was like looking at the body of his mother after his own birth. Had he also left an Aspen-shaped impression in her? Was the hole, in fact, himself?

The man was checking him over, doctor-like, but careful not to break the plastic. "We've got to get him into isolation," he said. "The suit is air-permeable, but filters out bionanos. I think he's unseeded."

"I knew it!" the woman said.

Aspen's attention was drifting inward toward the next dream. His eyes sagged shut, but the man pinched his face. "Stay with us, now. Can you tell me how you feel?"

"Tired," Aspen said. His voice sounded froggy.

They were wheeling him out then, lying strapped on the gurney. Grief passed through him at the thought of forsaking his box-body, alone and empty. Through his plastic placenta he looked up at the towering shelves passing by, interrupted by chasms. On the shelves stood iron statuary. One row was angels with bat wings.

The next row: saints twined with snakes.

The next: a woman with a tree sprouting from the side of her head.

DREAMS, DR. SEMIC had observed long ago, are built up not in sequence, as waking events are, but in overlapping concentric circles around core images, like rain falling on a pond. The dreamdrop is a vivid impression — a place, a person, a situation, an event. It falls onto your sleeping mind and begins forming ripples. As you, the dreamer, experience it, context begins to form around the drop like memories — the background of the person, the recollection of being in the place before, an event that happened just before the dreamdrop began, an event that happened after. As the circle of context around one dreamdrop expands, it meets the expanding circles of context from other drops, and the two structures become intertwined and linked. A firmer and firmer reality grows from their interaction.

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But on waking, the dream cannot be called into memory in its original form. The conscious memory works sequentially, and so a translation must take place. Only then does the dream come to seem disjointed and full of impossible leaps of logic: for memory must cut a linear path through the pattern of concentric circles. The very process of remembering scrambles the structure, making it simultaneously comprehensible and incomprehensible. People who claim they cannot remember dreams are simply not skilled in translation. But people who claim they *can* remember dreams are wrong; what they remember is a restructuring — a sequentializing — of the actual experience. A dream in its original form cannot be remembered.

Aspen became aware that no context was coming to mind for the face before him. He waited to remember her past, her significance to him. He waited to see if his perspective would become hers; she could, after all, be his persona in an intersecting dream. She inserted her hands into glove appendages in the plastic wall between them, picked up a bottle from the nightstand, and waved it before his face. He flinched back from the sharp ammonia smell.

"Are you awake?" she said.

"Perhaps I am," he said with wonder.

He was lying in a bed that was the whitest thing he could imagine. His filter suit was gone; the sheets felt dry and immaculate against his legs. Beyond the snowy counterpane, gauzy white veils hung from the bedposts. The boundary of the plastic bubble lay beyond the bed.

"Welcome back," she said gently.

She was a pillowy beauty: a swelling, soft body dressed in a clinging knit sweater and skirt, a curtain of thick dark hair that parted as she flung it back over her shoulder. Finally, the slow dreamdrop fell, giving him context: she had kissed him once.

"I am Jalisca," she said, pronouncing it the Spanish way, with a slight Castilian lisp. Her mouth had soft dimples on either side when she smiled, but it was the saddest smile in the world.

"Are you going to kiss me again?" he said.

"No." Her hair concealed her face as she looked down. "You can sit up now."

He did, meeting vertigo. Beyond the bubble, the room jutted out like

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the prow of a boat, cantilevered over a cliff. There were picture windows on two sides. Outside one was a gray and rainy sea; the other showed bare, wind-bent trees atop the headland. The impression was uncommonly vivid.

He waited, but nothing changed except the slow progress of combers coming in from beyond the horizon. Watching them, he began to drift inward, and Jalisca startled him back with another wave of the ammoniac bottle.

"You will have to make an effort to stay awake," she said.

"Yes," he agreed.

Was he truly awake? His mind seemed slow, walled off, laboring along a single pathway rather than darting multidirectionally.

She began to ask him questions in her accented English — testing, he realized, to see what he knew. From time to time she would exclaim to herself in Spanish, until he finally asked her why.

"Your father, Dr. Semic, was a great genius," she said. "He thought of everything, in that casket he designed for you. Do you realize how remarkable it is that your physical development has been so uncomplicated? Ordinarily, one would say it is even more miraculous that your brain is not impaired. But your father knew what he did. He did it to show us."

He listened to the story with a sense of detachment. It turned out he had been six years old when he went into the box. For fifteen years the box had fed him stimuli, information, images of the outside world. He had learned and grown and experienced in a dream state that mimicked the reality outside. Mimicked, but not reproduced. While he had slept, the world had changed: a contagion had swept over the earth, leaving everything different but him.

He swung his feet out of the bed and she came over to help him stand, her hands warm against his arm through the plastic gloves. Hesitantly, still weak and uncoordinated, he walked along the boundary of the bubble to look out the window — but not the one that faced the lulling sea. He chose instead the side that faced the land. Atop the cliff, the bare, skeletal trees stood out black and knotty against the sky. Their branches were populated by a flock of hunchback crows. When they sensed his eye upon them they all lifted together in a cloud of black wings.

"What was I?" he asked. "An experiment?"

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"No," Jalisca said at his side. "You were the control. The rest of us are his experiment."

It was odd, how he was always the same person whenever he woke up. His age never changed, nor his body. He was always dressed in the same pajamas he had gone to sleep in, and the trees were always outside his window. He never switched perspectives with anyone else, or saw events from outside. At first he was charmed by the novel continuity, but it soon grew troubling. He had not chosen this persona, and was not sure he wanted to keep it.

And yet, he did want to stay awake. There was something *convincing* about this world. Its physicality was so distracting, it made him grateful for the repetitive rules. He could not shed a sense that he had missed something by dozing away fifteen years. To make up for it, he needed to experience as many hours a day as possible. But it was hard to maintain the tunnel-vision concentration of waking for more than an hour or two at a time. The world was too full of sleep-triggers.

Dressed in another isolation suit, he soon found his way around the large house where only Jalisca and the soap-faced Dr. Wilson lived. Its pleasant, empty rooms were green with house plants slumbering in the soporific sunlight. His favorite room faced west, overlooking the sea. By the window, the articulated skeleton of an emu posed amid the frondage, one leg raised. Aspen stroked Adorno, the resident white cat, stretched out in boneless luxury on the Navaho rug, and listened to the settling dust.

There was little else to do. On the sound system he sampled the doctor's endless collection of lazy swing jazz tunes. Only three channels were alive on the television, and one was flickery and full of snow. He watched old movies on another, their color fading in and out. Sometimes, déjà vu would strike him with the certainty he had dreamed all this before, but try as he might, he could not bring the dream to mind. Finally, encased against the wind, he learned to walk the rocky cliffs, trying to wake himself with danger and cold, but in the background of his brain the surf whispered, seducing him into reverie.

Jalisca was often with him, both waking and sleeping. In his dreams, she was a lush and tropical presence with peach-fuzz skin, and his sleep

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was warm with erotic fires. Waking, there was always a plastic barrier between them.

"Will I have to spend the rest of my life in isolation?" he asked the doctor.

"Only if you choose," Wilson said. "But it is not time yet for you to make that choice. First, you must learn to stay awake."

Jalisca tried to help by keeping him occupied with conversation. She asked him often about his memories of his father, but it was difficult to sort out fifteen years of dreams from what came before. "Is he dead?" Aspen asked.

"Yes," she said softly. Her dark eyelashes touched her cheeks for a moment, as if in grief. He could not be sure; some fresh bereavement seemed always on her mind.

"My mother? My family?" he asked.

"All gone. An airplane crash, years ago."

They took him to visit the city that lay south along the coast. The road was in bad repair, full of potholes and washouts that looked like some monster had taken a bite out of the pavement. He had expected a vibrant, bustling metropolis, but instead the streets seemed too wide for the thin traffic. The skyscrapers looked tarnished and scummy, many of the shop windows were covered with brown paper, and fat pigeons picked over the litter in the gutters.

"Is it because of the plague?" Aspen asked.

"In a way," Dr. Wilson said, shrugging. "But it is more that our energies have turned elsewhere. We do what we must to maintain things, but we are building other cities now."

"In space?" Aspen asked, since that was what his dreams had led him to believe.

"You might say so," said Dr. Wilson. "We are colonizing new space."

On the drive back, Aspen fell asleep to the hypnotic hum of the engine.

"Who are you?" he asked Jalisca at last.

His mind was clearing; he had managed to stay awake for five hours the day before. He asked the question to fight off drowsiness. They were sitting together in the sunroom. She was spread out on a loveseat, wearing

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a white knit top, a brightly dyed peasant skirt, and sandals. In the adjoining room, the doctor was listening to a recording. A sultry saxophone purred, barely stirring the air.

"Aspen, dear Aspen," she murmured, gazing out the window. The "dear" thrilled him, but when he followed her gaze, he became lost in the sight of surf, rolling eternally in, the visible alpha waves of the sea.

With a terrible effort he wrenched his mind away, biting his tongue to stay awake.

"Who — are — you?"

She was watching him. "I will tell you the truth," she said in a distant voice. "Dr. Wilson and I, we are freedom fighters."

In the next room, something hit the floor with a clatter.

In the quiet that followed, Aspen felt as if he were being washed by a ripple from another dreamdrop. At last he said, "Who are you fighting?"

"The organization your father founded. Are you surprised?"

Aspen was accustomed to a reality that often took off at right angles; nothing surprised him.

She said, "Semicor has forsaken your father's ideals. It has become something he never intended: bigger than any nation, a global god of the world's dreams. It rules us in our sleep. Aspen, you are the only one who is still free."

He could not answer.

Rising with a silky swish of skirt, she came over to take his hand in hers. "Come. I want to introduce you to your father."

The video was old and hand-made. It had been filmed, Aspen realized oddly, in the very room where they sat. The man in the armchair with the dark-haired child on his lap was the most fully *awake* person Aspen had ever seen. He had an angular, granitic face, as if carved by an impatient sculptor. Aspen tried to feel recognition. On the screen, the man set the child on the ground and it toddled off. ("That is you," Jalisca whispered.) Then he began to speak.

> Dreams. They are the font of inspiration, the wellspring of creativity. Before recorded history, shamans sought wisdom in dreams. In dreams, artworks have been conceived, religious insights revealed, theorems solved. Pythagoras, Kekulé, Einstein — all tapped

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the reservoir of dreams. Imagine we could unleash that power — what a world we could become!

Up to now, the potential of our non-waking minds has lain dormant for lack of a method to communicate it. When our anthropoid ancestors first spoke a word, they created a bias toward waking thought, which could be expressed by a sequential, logical code like language. It came to seem that the part of our thoughts that could be linguicized was the only part worth developing. The rest was mere dross and gibberish, useful for nothing.

He paused. The Shakespearean rhythms of his words still echoed like distant thunder from the hills. His eyes were gripping the camera as if he could see through the lens into the future. Now his words began plunging forward, into the gravity well of his ideas.

Our waking brain has brought us far. It was clever and rational enough to raise us out of squalor and build a modern world. And now, it has brought us a technology that will allow access to the other, hidden, aspect of our psyches.

This is the next phase of evolution. It is a change as fundamental as the invention of language. For centuries, humankind's greatest abilities have been walled off, inaccessible for lack of a way to communicate them. Now, we have leapfrogged over the need for language. In Oneiria, we can share our inspirations directly, and build on them. We can communicate the non-linear, supra-rational aspects of our minds. In Oneiria, we will create a new civilization. It will be different from anything that has gone before.

Great unmined treasure lies waiting in our minds. It is a new frontier as expansive as all space, but it has lain within us all along. I invite you to join us in this greatest of all adventures, this exploration that will never end.

The recording stopped. Jalisca flicked the screen off. The silence released a long breath.

"He was a great visionary," Jalisca said. "The rare genius who could not only invent the technology, but foresee its social repercussions. He

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knew that if the technology were not made available to all, it would create an elite. But if *everyone* became a citizen of Oneiria, we would all meet on the same footing in our dreams. There would be no plutocrats, no beggars, no barriers of race or creed in Oneiria. And just perhaps, utopia might become possible for the first time in history."

It struck him that this was what she was mourning — this beautiful vision.

"You believe in it," he said.

"Yes. He came to speak at my college in Buenos Aires. He was an inspiring man. Soon, there were troops of students heading out into the pampas with their medical kits, spreading the joyous infection. It was the same in Ukraine and Sumatra and Bangladesh. He went everywhere, and everywhere young volunteers were ready to help. All we needed to do was inject a few people, and they would spread it to the rest."

"What was it?" he asked. "A disease?"

"Nanoelectronics housed in bacterial cells. They take up residence in the brain, multiplying and permeating the tissue till they form a complex neuronet and begin transmitting and receiving. The signals are not strong; they need to be amplified. But the amplifiers are no more expensive than a television set, and far more entertaining, so companies sprang up to manufacture and sell them. Meanwhile, Semicor was leasing the satellite capability to link them in a giant interactive network. It was all underway while you were a child, but you probably were not aware of it."

"No," he said. Neither had it been in the dreams his father had so carefully bequeathed him.

"When we wake, the seed sleep," she said. "When we sleep, they wake. And when we begin to dream, then we enter a realm where.... How can I describe Oneiria? It is beyond language: like a collaborative work of music, a jam session, but our notes are dream images. Or it is a landscape where we build new worlds out of the bricks we bring with us from our waking lives. No night is the same as the one before; Oneiria is constantly evolving, always unexpected. We play each others' dreams, transform them, build on them, spin off from them, and then others enter our dreams and amaze us. Each night we create improvisational structures, events, beings, places. We feast on infatuation, awe, fear, surprise — always surprise. Everyone loves Oneiria. It is the most wondrous place ever imagined by humans."

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If the devotion in her voice had been aimed at him, Aspen would have fallen instantly in love. Even the backwash of her passion made his heart caper. "Does everyone feel this way?" he asked.

"Everyone," she said firmly, but then corrected herself. "Oh, there are some diehard Wakers. Some wear helmets to bar the transmissions, some move to the mountains, out of range of any amplifier. It does not matter. They are free to choose, just as the rest of us ought to be."

Her voice had gone bitter on the last words. "Then what went wrong?" he asked.

Her soft eyebrows bunched together. "Oneiria is ours," she said. "It does not belong to Semicor. They are merely the conduit, the means. They do not have the right to set the rules or control our access. It is counter to the ideals of Dr. Semic. Oneiria was meant to be the creation of all humanity, but it has become another place of oppression."

She could not meet his eyes. Feeling for her, he said, "How do they oppress you?"

"They have protocols and failsafes we object to. Programs to stop nightmare cascades, and to sanitize the thoughtweb. But they have given ground on those, setting up specialized domains. That is not the main problem, anyway."

"Then what?"

The look in her eyes was dark. In a low voice, she said, "They force us to wake up."

Given his background, it did not occur to Aspen at first that there might be a good argument for waking. But she rehearsed them all to him in subsequent days, all the specious objections Semicor made. They allowed up to twelve hours of sleep a day, but said that any more disrupted normal physiological rhythms and impaired health. "You have put the lie to that argument," Jalisca said triumphantly.

He felt proud of himself.

Semicor argued further that the work of the world needed to be done, and spending time in Oneiria did not put food on the table or a roof over anyone's head. "There is truth in it, of course," Jalisca said, "but it is not their place to be policemen for the employers of the world. It ought to be the decision of humanity, freely made. That is all we are asking for. A choice."

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And yet, knowing that she spent the twelve waking hours in exile, pining for her beloved Oneiria, filled Aspen with vague anxiety. After all, it was only in the waking world he saw her — so compelling, so melancholy, so consistent from day to day. He began to think forward to the time when he could join her in sleep.

All the more so because there had been a disturbing change in his own dream life. As he slowly learned to wake, he was shocked to find that his memory of sleeptime faded, blocked by amnesia. Alarmed, he consulted the doctor, but Wilson only laughed. "Perfectly normal," he said. "There are people whose sleep amnesia is nearly total, as total as early childhood amnesia — and possibly for the same reason. The brain only retains experiences organized in a sequential structure."

It seemed a terrible price: to have half his life negated by the other half, as if he had been cut in two. He wanted to knit himself together by sheer will, so he tried calling back his dreams as he passed the boundary to waking. But even when he managed to salvage them, they seemed weak and fragmented.

I have been exiled from half myself, he thought.

He began poring over a dog-eared Semicor catalog Jalisca gave him, reading about the domains he might sign up to enter. It was always done in advance, since there was no conscious will in Oneiria: no deliberate decision-making, no ability to steer. Once there, he would be unmoored in the stream of mind.

There were domains designed for children, illustrated by colorful cartoons. They had the most stringent controls, and adults were completely barred from some. In adult domains, there were choices for erotic content, levels of nightmare, and phobia blocks. There were domains for women only, and for Muslims, and for those with a taste for violence. He might choose to dream with interest groups: spiritual insight seemed popular, and lucid-dreaming clubs. There were no guarantees on content, of course: that was entirely up to the nightly creativity of the dreamers.

One afternoon he fell asleep on the couch in the moist sunroom with the cat on his lap, and woke to the sound of the telephone ringing. It had never rung before.

He waited for someone to answer it, but the burr kept sounding through the silent afternoon air. At last he went to look for it.

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"Hello?" he said.

There was a hiss on the line. At last a woman's voice, faint and far away, said, "Is Aspen Semic there?"

"Speaking," he said, as someone had once taught him.

A staticky silence followed. He could hear faint voices, other conversations bleeding through, the words almost distinguishable.

"You are Aspen Semic?" the voice said.

"Yes."

"Do you know the word?"

Now he was the one who paused. "I know a lot of words," he said.

It sounded as if the caller were having a conversation with someone else, her hand over the receiver. Suddenly, so loud and clear he jumped, her voice said, "Tell me the word."

There was a series of clicks, and a raspy dial tone.

Later, when he told the others, Jalisca turned away, but not before he had seen her stricken look. It was the ancient look of desperate women grieving the loss of their brothers, sons, husbands.

Wilson looked clammy as a mushroom. He said, "Nothing to do with you." His tone sent a feeling like a swallowed ice cube down Aspen's throat.

That night, Aspen woke in his bed, inside the bubble. The moon hung silver halfway up the sky, bright enough to cast a shadow on the floor, and to outline the scarred trees against the sky. Jalisca stood at the window looking out, and from that he knew he must be dreaming, because she was never awake at night. Night she spent in Oneiria.

He got out of bed, padding to the edge of the plastic bubble. She turned, and it looked like she had been crying. "Aspen, there is no more time," she said. "You must try to remember. Did your father give you some clue, some code?"

He searched his mind. "No."

"Please. You must think back. A set of words, of numbers?"

He pressed his hands against the surface that separated them. He had not touched another human being since waking. The longing for contact had grown almost unbearable.

"Please, Aspen, concentrate. We think it is the reason he saved you, so there would be one person left free, one person Semicor could not control. He foresaw it all. He meant you to set us free."

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"Jalisca," he said, "I want to join you. I want to come out, even though I'll get infected."

"No," she said. "We must do as he wished."

"I don't care what he wished. I want to be with you, awake. Please open the bubble. Wake me up."

She raised a hand and touched the plastic. He pressed his cheek against the other side and felt her fingers run down to his chin through the slick, cold layer. "No, Aspen. Not unless you remember. I'm sorry, but this is real."

He laughed at that. "I'm dreaming," he said.

"Maybe," the dream-Jalisca conceded, "but what is unreal about that? Did you ever, in the last fifteen years, doubt that your dream world was real?"

"No," he admitted.

"And why do you believe your waking senses are any more reliable than your sleeping ones? Aspen, the concept of 'illusion' is itself an illusion."

"Then what is this? Where am I now?"

"In exile," she said. "Until you can free us with the word."

He looked beyond her then, out the window toward the headland, and saw against the stormcloud sky a man standing on the cliff watching the house with binoculars.

THE NEXT DAY, rain poured down from sagging clouds. Far below the cliffs, the surf tore itself to rags against rain-blackened rocks, and salty spray whipped against the windows. About 3:00 the electricity failed, and Dr. Wilson put on a raincoat to go out and see what was wrong. Adorno prowled tensely, crouching behind the skeletal emu with just the tip of his tail twitching. Without the lights, the house was very dark.

The sound of a gunshot made Aspen sit up.

A second one made him rise and go to the kitchen window looking out toward the road, the direction the doctor had gone. Presently, Wilson crossed the yard carrying something in a black plastic trash bag. Several minutes later, the lights came back on.

Aspen was sitting at the kitchen table when Dr. Wilson came in,

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shaking rain off his black coat. He went to the sink to wash off his hands.

"Is everything all right?" Aspen asked.

"Just raccoons," Dr. Wilson said in a falsely jocular tone.

I am not safe, Aspen thought. No one in this house is safe.

That night he took a kitchen knife to bed with him. For the first time, he found himself unable to sleep. He heard tiny ticks and creaks that had never passed the boundary of notice before. Worries whizzed and collided in his brain, making an amusement-park jangle too loud to let him rest. His waking self was a greedy thing, he realized. Not content with stealing his memories, it had started eating away his sleep-self. *Me, me,* it was saying to his brain. *Pay attention to me.*

It had realized that it might cease to exist, and it was in a panic.

To calm it, he fantasized briefly, in a kind of waking dream, about returning to the peace of his box, safe in anonymity; was that so bad? *Yes,* his waking self answered. He was no longer content with that. The sensory world had taken up residence in his brain; it had begun to re-create him as a more vivid person, one with desires and cares. He wanted to go on. But going on threatened someone, somewhere, and that threatened him.

He sat up, motivated for the first time in his life to take an action of his own. It did not occur to him that his nascent self had crossed a threshold. He picked up the knife, the solution. The way to remove the threat was to remove the bait.

Saying a silent farewell to his past, he faced the sea and raised the knife. Then he thrust the point through the plastic of the bubble and sawed till he had made a long slit and the bubble began to deflate. He wormed out through the birth-wound he had created.

The touch of humid air on skin was the first thing he noticed; the second thing was the myriad subtle smells of mold, dust, and rain. He wanted to rush out into the yard and feel the cold drops pounding on his naked body, but it was not safe yet..

On bare feet he crept through the house, past the plants and silent shelves of recordings. When he reached Jalisca's bedroom he paused, his heart dancing to a rumba beat. He eased open the door.

She was sleeping with her hair in dark billows around her face. Her lids were alive with REM sleep, and shifting green and red lights lit the

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headboard as it monitored her. He knelt at her side like a rescuing prince, laying a reverent hand on her hair. Then, slowly, he bent forward to kiss her on the lips.

Her mouth was as soft and scented as he had imagined, but perfectly lifeless. He had imagined her waking and smiling to see him, but there was no response, even when he gathered her head in his hands in order to kiss her more ardently. She was limp, utterly absent. When he pulled back, her mouth fell open.

Disturbed, he backed away. He licked his lips where they had touched her, as if to clean away the sin. He had not intended to take a liberty she could never know or remember. He had only intended to contract her disease, in order to sleep with her in his soul.

The next morning, Dr. Wilson was coldly livid at what Aspen had done. Jalisca was devastated, and wept bitterly. "Could you not wait? Could you not have patience and faith in your father's wisdom?" she said.

"Perhaps this is what he intended," Aspen said.

"No, no, he would not have gone to such great lengths to preserve you untouched. You were the message he intended to send us. Now we will never know what it was."

She stormed from the room. Alone, Aspen touched the spot where she had been sitting. It was still warm. His heart rose like a spirit from the grave.

"Meet me in Oneiria," he pleaded her later. "When I get there."

"You don't understand," she said. "It's not like this world, where you can put an appointment on your calendar. There is no will in Oneiria. If I come into your dreams, it is because your mind is generating my image. I might be there, but I cannot influence how your mind will portray me. Perhaps I will be the bug on the wall, or the wind."

"No," he said, "my mind would never portray you as anything but what you are."

"Why do you persist in thinking that this is what I am? How do you know it is not your mind generating *this* image?"

"I never could have thought of you," he said.

He had expected it to take days, if not weeks, for the dreamseed to infect his brain and start functioning. But even the next night he could feel the tug of something greater outside himself. It was dim and incoherent,

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but he sensed it: a realm crowded with imagination, where the human race was constructing a new, involuntary culture.

On the third night Dr. Wilson yielded to his pleading and let him have an amplifier in his room. "You won't need one nearby when the seed are fully established," he said. "As long as you are within a few thousand feet of one, it will pick you up. There are very few places you can go anymore that don't have amplifiers at least that close."

That night, he had an uncommonly coherent set of dreams.

A hotel dressed in elegant archaic: from a balcony he sees the lobby, an atrium like the nave of a gothic cathedral, arches of ironwork and glass. He is searching for someone. Down on the terazzo, travelers and baggage mill at the registration windows. An overweight, sweaty man in shorts, carrying luggage, leads his wife and two children past, and says enthusiastically, "Isn't this just the greatest place?"

Down in line, he looks for the person he is supposed to meet. A bellboy pushes a rolling cart of luggage through the crowd and says, "I've got your reservation, Mr. Semic. Follow me." Up an elevator to a floor under construction. Cheerfully, the bellboy pushes his cart down a deserted hall past stacks of raw drywall and debris. "I can't go to my room yet," Aspen says. "I need to meet someone."

The glass-roofed restaurant seems acres across, packed with diners on terraces separated by brick walls and

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greenery. He threads past tables, looking for his party, and is hailed by a group of elderly diners in evening dress. He stops to be polite. They eat a full meal from trays floating on a steaming tub. He is missing his appointment. As a hot air balloon rises languidly past the windows, he leads a frail old lady to her elevator. "What a nice young man," she says.

The bar is a dark and mazy place, all colored lights and flashing strobes. He searches through the booths, where people glitter and clench their teeth on holders for tiny cigars. At last he sees her through smoked glass. He calls out; she turns. She is just a plastic mannikin, part of the bar décor.

The bellboy is waiting on a pile of lumber. He jumps up cheerfully. "Sorry, sorry," Aspen says. "Maybe she'll call my room." Down gutted corridors they go to a room that is nothing more than timber frame and ductwork. "We did warn you we were remodeling," the bellboy says.

Out of frustration and disappointment Aspen searches for some devastating rejoinder. It comes to him in a tune:

Way over Lippo
The lamboys is,
The lamboys are.

He sings, and soon all the people in the room are singing, voices raised

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in irresistible unison. It spreads contagiously over the hotel, then leaps over seas and continents, the jingle no one can get out of their head.

Aspen jerked awake, the tune still echoing in his mind.

All across the dark side of the globe the power grids strained to meet the sudden demand as people simultaneously sat up and switched on their bedside lights.

Aspen switched on his bedside light. He sat up, trying to sort out what he had just experienced. Had it truly been an interactive dream? Had the other people in the hotel been other dreamers, glimpsed as they went about their own trains of thought? If so, what had *their* dream been like? He had no actual proof anyone else had been there.

As Aspen thought, the power demand waned. Across the continent, people switched off their lights and turned over to go back to sleep.

Aspen did not go back to sleep. Left with a feeling of incompletion, he rose and passed through the house to Jalisca's door. Cautiously, he cracked it open, hoping to find her awake; but she was curled on her side with her back to him. He resisted the temptation to watch her sleep. Instead, he went out to the couch and spent the rest of the night there.

He was wakened by the cat. It was late morning. At Adorno's insistence he padded out to the kitchen and found the cat food, something he had never had to do before. He then puzzled out how to make the coffee, anticipating Dr. Wilson's surprise at finding a pot waiting for him.

The hours passed, noon came, and the house was as quiet as a still life. Aspen tiptoed to Jalisca's door and peeked in. She had not moved since the night before. He went to her side and said her name, but there was no response, so he touched her shoulder, then shook her. She was perfectly flaccid. No more than eyes moving in a nerveless body.

It was a little chilling, to see her in daylight with all humanity erased. He backed away, wrestling to expel a sudden thought from his mind: that he had stumbled into some forbidden backstage of reality, and had come upon her as she was, as everyone was — a puppet only animate when the controlling hand of consciousness was present.

Troubled, he went to Dr. Wilson's bedroom. Overcoming his reluctance to see the doctor asleep, he went in. The man was on his back, hair

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rumpled and mouth slightly open. There was something infantile about the blankness on his face.

Aspen sat on the couch, stroking the cat and wondering what to do. When he dialed the emergency number on the phone, twenty rings went by before he gave up. The old movies still ran on one television channel, but the others were snow. At last, debating with himself, he found a hammer in the kitchen drawer and took it to Jalisca's bedroom. The sight of her slack face sent indignation through him, and he made an angry swing at the electronic headboard of her bed. The plastic splintered, microchips crunched, and the winking lights went out. She gave a sigh that raised his hopes, but when he touched her she was inert as before.

When he went in to Dr. Wilson's room he found the man's bladder had let loose, and he was lying in sheets soaked with urine. The sight gave Aspen the energy to bring the hammer down on the second amplifier — three, four times till it was dead. He then went into his own room and smashed the portable one there.

Still the sleepers did not wake.

He went out to the circuit box in the garage and found the master switch for electricity in the house. It made a loud clunk when he threw it off. Jalisca's bedroom was dark as a tomb when he returned to it, but she slept on.

He needed to find help. The car was still in the driveway, pointed toward the road. Otherwise, he might never have gotten it out, since he could find only the "go" and "stop" pedals, not the one to make it go backward. For company, and because he was worried about getting back, he took Adorno with him. The cat quickly disappeared under the front seat.

There was no traffic. Aspen tried to remember the route Dr. Wilson had taken into the city, but somewhere he made a wrong turn, because he found himself driving down an empty street through a residential suburb. On either side, houses lay behind broad lawns. Cars were parked in the garages, and toys lay abandoned in the yards where children had pleaded with their parents to let them go to sleep early. He parked at random and went up to a house. No one answered his knocks, so he peered in the windows. The kitchen was cleaned, the lights were out, the television silent.

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He came to a commercial strip. The lights were on in many of the businesses, but the doors were locked. The fast-food restaurants had never opened. The parking lot at the mall was empty. He coasted up the ramp to a freeway, and startled a flock of seagulls from the pavement.

Stopping the car in the middle of the four lanes, he got out. The concrete still smelled of tires and oil and hurry. Leaning on the guard rail with the sea wind fingering his hair, he could see the city across the bay, like a giant crystal on the shore. Twilight was approaching, and the streetlights were coming on automatically, so that the city was beginning to twinkle. He followed the sweep of the bridge with his eyes, and saw a pair of moving headlights on it.

Animated by the sight, he jumped back in the car and drove on, trying to find the way to the bridge through looping strands of highway, anxious that he would be too late. Once, he had to make a U-turn to get back to an exit he had missed. But when he got to the bridge, the northbound and southbound lanes were separated by a tall concrete divider. He stopped and tried to climb the wall to signal the other car, but it was no use. He heard it pass on the other side with a whish of tires.

He drove on into the city. The streets were bright and empty. Once, he saw someone silhouetted in a window high above the street, but even as he watched, the curtains closed and the light went out. Turning randomly, he came to an old brick warehouse area that had long ago been converted into small shops. He hit the brakes when he saw a storefront with the lights on, and someone moving inside.

It was a secondhand comic-book shop. The clerk was a balding, blondish man with glasses who looked up in surprise when Aspen entered. "A customer!" he said, putting down the electronic game he had been playing. "What can I do you for?"

The man seemed so unconcerned that Aspen for a moment doubted his own judgment of the situation. "Has this happened before?" he asked uncertainly.

"Has what happened before?"

Aspen gestured at the deserted city.

"Obviously not," the man said, "or the insomniacs would have inherited the earth." He laughed.

"Why are you awake?" Aspen said.

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"Screwed-up circadian rhythms. It's these antihistamines. I must have gotten up just before it happened."

"*What* happened?"

The man shrugged. "I suppose the old man's Trojan Horse finally got through."

"What are you talking about?" The conversation was making Aspen feel unreal.

"I thought everyone knew that rumor. The one that Dr. Semic planted a Trojan Horse in the population—someone who at the proper time would release a code that would reset all the bionanos to free them from Semicor's control. So the dream world could evolve naturally."

He got up and started switching off the lights.

"What are you doing?" Aspen said.

"Going home, going to bed."

"Aren't you afraid of not waking up?"

"I'll wake up when I need a pizza bad enough, I suppose."

Aspen was not so sure. "No one else has," he said.

The clerk lowered the venetian blinds over the windows with a clatter. "Not yet, no. Do you blame them? Wake up to come back to what? This?" He peered out at the rundown street. "I don't know. We've used this reality up. It's human nature to move on, to build new things."

He opened the door, keys in hand. "You gonna buy something?"

"No," Aspen said.

"Then hasta luego. See you in Oneiria."

From the car, Aspen watched the man walk down the cracked sidewalk, then disappear into a doorway. A light came on briefly in an upstairs window, then switched off.

As the night darkened around him, Aspen drove aimlessly, knowing he could not long resist sleep. The road entered a shoreline park. It was dark under the trees, and Aspen didn't know how to turn on the car lights, but he drove on by the dim afterglow of the city behind him. Eventually, he pulled over at a spot where he could look back across the water. The lights were reflected in the bay.

With the car still, the cat came out from his hiding place and tried to crawl in Aspen's lap. Aspen scratched him, enjoying the vibration of his purr and the unpredictable animation of his body. There were so many

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things he still enjoyed about this world he had barely begun to know. He did not feel finished with it yet.

Gathering the cat in his arms, he opened the door and got out. On the beach, little waves lapped against the shore and Aspen sat there on the sand, listening. Adorno lay warm on his lap, making no move to escape, perhaps sensing in his animal mind that he was needed. The sleeping city seemed to float over its mirror-image in the water. Aspen felt its beauty sharply, painfully, as only things about to be lost are felt. Now that it was too late, an insistent life-hunger had wakened in him. He wanted to cling to this world, to hold it to his lips. But not alone.

All around him, people slept. In the hospitals across the bay, the patients dozed painlessly, slipping unnoticed over the boundary into endless dreams. The computers still hummed in the buildings, the satellites circled automatically overhead. Aspen bent over to kiss the cat goodbye, and fierce tears of longing started into his eyes. They blurred the stars as he lay back and waited for the human race to bend down and wake him.

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A film adaptation of Scott Bradfield's first novel, The History of Luminous Motion, *was recently released and Mr. Bradfield says he's currently drafting a script based on his second novel,* What's Wrong with America. *(But don't listen to anyone who tries to convince you that his third novel,* Animal Planet, *has been adapted into a cable TV network.) Scott B. lives in London nowadays and reviews regularly for* The Observer *and the* Times Literary Supplement. *This story, a version of which was published for high-fliers in* Swissair Magazine, *suggests that the Devil does indeed keep up with the times.*

The Devil Disinvests

By Scott Bradfield

"I DON'T THINK OF IT AS laying off workers," the Devil told his Chief Executive Officer, Punky Wilkenfeld, a large round man with bloodshot eyes and wobbly knees. "I think of it as downsizing to a more user-friendly mode of production. I guess what I'm saying, Punky, is that we can't spend all eternity thinking about nothing more important than the bottom line. Maybe it's finally time to kick back, reflect on our achievements, and start enjoying some of that well-deserved R&R we've promised ourselves for so long."

As always, the Devil tried to be reasonable. But this didn't prevent his long-devoted subordinate from weeping copiously into his worsted vest.

"What will I *do*?" Punky asked himself over and over again. "Where will I *go*? All this time I thought you loved me because I was really, really evil. Now I realize you only kept me around because, oh God. For you it was just, just, it was just *business*."

The Devil folded his long forked tail into his belt and checked himself out in the wall-sized vanity mirror behind his desk. He was wearing a

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snappy handmade suit by Vuiton, gleaming Cordovan leather shoes, and prescription Ray-Bans. The Devil had long been aware that it wasn't enough to be good at what you did. In order for people to know it, you had to look good, as well.

Roger "Punky" Wilkenfeld lay drooped over the edge of the Devil's desk like a very old gardenia. The Devil couldn't help himself. He really loved this guy.

"What can I tell you, Roger?" the Devil said, as gently as he could. "Eventually it comes time for everybody to move on, and so in this particular instance, I'll blaze the trail, and leave you and the boys to pack things up in your own good time. Just be sure to lock up when you leave."

THE DEVIL WENT to California. He rented a beachfront cottage on the Central Coast, sold off his various penthouses and Tuscan villas, and settled into the reflective life as easily as an anemone in a tide pool. Every day he walked to the local grocery for fresh fruits and vegetables, took long strolls into the dry amber hills, or rented one of the Nouvelle Vague classics he'd always meant to watch from Blockbuster. He disdained malls, televised sports, and corporate-owned franchise restaurants. He tore up his credit cards, stopped worrying about the bottom line, and never once opened his mail.

In his heyday, the devil had enjoyed the most exotic pleasures that could be devised by an infinite array of saucy, fun-loving girls named Delilah. But until he met Melanie, he had never actually known true love.

"I guess it's because love takes time," the Devil reflected, on the night they first slept together on the beach. "And time has never been something I've had too much of. Bartering for souls, keeping the penitents in agony, stoking the infernos of unutterable suffering and so forth. And then, as if that's not enough, having to deal with all the endless constant whining. Oh *please*, Master, *please* take my soul, *please* grant me unlimited wealth and fame and eternal youth and sex with any gal in the office, I'll do *any*thing you ask, please *please*. When a guy's in the damnation game, he never gets a moment's rest. If I'd met you five years ago, Mel? I don't think I'd have stopped working long enough to realize

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what a wonderful, giving person you really are. But I've got the time now, baby. Come here a sec. I've definitely got lots of time for you now."

They moved in together. They had children — a girl and a boy. They shopped at the Health Food Co-Op, campaigned for animal rights, and installed an energy efficient Aga in the kitchen. They even canceled the lease on the Devil's Volvo, and transported themselves everywhere on matching ten-speed racing bikes. These turned out to be the most wonderful and relaxing days the Devil had ever known.

Then, one afternoon when the Devil was sorting recyclable materials into their appropriate plastic bins, he received a surprise visitor from his past. Melanie had just taken the kids to Montessori. The Devil had been looking forward all day to catching up with his chores.

"How they hanging, big boy? I guess I imagined all sorts of comeuppances for a useless old fart like yourself, but certainly never this. Wasting your once-awesome days digging through garbage. Cleaning the windows and mowing the lawn."

When the Devil looked up, he saw Punky Wilkenfeld climbing out of a two-door Corvette. Clad in one of the Devil's old suits, he looked slightly out of place amidst so much expensive retailoring. Some guys know how to hang clothes, the Devil thought. And some guys just don't.

"Why, Punky," the Devil said softly, not without affection. "It's you."

"It sure is, pal. But they don't call me Punky anymore."

"Oh no?" The Devil absently licked a bit of stale egg from his forepaw.

"Nope. These days, people call me *Mr.* Wilkenfeld. Or better yet, the Eternal Lord of Darkness and Pain."

"It's like this, Pop," Punky continued over Red Zinger tea in the breakfast room. "When you took off, you left a trillion hungry mouths to feed. Mouths with razor-sharp teeth. Mouths with multitudinously-forked tongues. Frankly, I didn't know what to do, so I turned the whole kit-and-kaboodle over to the free-market-system and just let it ride. We went on the Dow in March, and by summer we'd bought out two of our closest rivals — Microsoft and ITT. I even hear Mr. Hot-Shot Heavenly Father's been doing a little diversifying. Doesn't matter to me, either. Whoever spends it, it's all money."

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"It's always good to see a former employee make good, Punky," the Devil said graciously. "I mean, excuse me. *Mr.* Wilkenfeld."

Punky finished his tea with a long, parched swallow. "*Ahh,*" he said, and hammered the mug down with a short rude bang. "I guess I just wanted you to know that I haven't forgotten you, Pops. In fact, I've even bought this little strip of beach you call home, and once we've finished erecting the new condos, we'll move on to offshore oil rigs, docking facilities, maybe even a yachting club or two. Basically, Pop, I'm turning your life into scrap metal. Nothing to do with business, either. I just personally hate your guts."

The Devil gradually grew aware of a dim beeping sound. With a sigh, Punky reached into his vest pocket and deactivated his digital phone with a brisk little flick.

"Probably my broker," Punky said. "He calls at least six times a day."

The Devil distantly regarded his former *chargé d'affaires,* whose soft pink lips were beaded with perspiration and bad faith. Poor Punky, the Devil thought. Some guys just never learn.

"And wanta know the best thing about this shoreline redevelopment project, Pop? There's absolutely nothing you can do about it. You take it to the courts — I own them. You take it to the Board of Supervisors — I own *them.* You organize eight million sit-down demonstrations and I pave the whole damn lot of you over with bulldozers. That's the real pleasure of dealing dirt to you born-again types, Pop. *You* gotta be *good.* But I don't."

The Devil watched Punky stand, brush himself off, and reach for his snakeskin briefcase. Then, as if seeking a balance to this hard, unaccommodating vision, he looked out his picture window at the hardware equipment littering his back yard. The Devil had been intending to install aluminum siding all week, and he hated to see unfulfilled projects rust away in the salty sea air.

"One second," the Devil said. "I'll be right back."

"Sorry, Pop, but this is one CEO who believes in full-steam-ahead, toot toot! Keep in touch, guy. Unless, that is, I keep touch with *you* first — "

But of course before Punky reached the front door the Devil had already returned from his back yard with the shearing scissors. And Punky, who had belonged to the managerial classes for more eons than he

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cared to remember, was slow to recognize any instrument used in the performance of manual labor.

"Hey, Pop, that's more like it," Punky said slowly, the wrong sun dawning from the wrong hills. "I could use a little grooming if only to remind us both who's boss. Here, see, at the edge of this cloven hoof? What does that look like to you? A hangnail?"

Punky had crouched down so low that it almost resembled submission.

At which point the Devil commenced to chop Punky Wilkenfeld into a million tiny bits.

"Seagulls don't mind what they eat," the Devil reflected later. He was standing at the end of a long wooden pier, watching white birds dive into the frothy red water. "Which is probably why they remind me so much of men."

The Devil wondered idly if his life had a moral. If it did, he decided, it was probably this:

Just because people change their lives for the better doesn't mean they're stupid.

Then, remembering it was his turn to do bouillabaisse, the Devil turned his back on the glorious sunset and went home.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Blackberry Wine, by Joanne Harris, Avon Books, July 2000, $24.

LAST YEAR at this time I found myself writing about Harris's enchanting novel *Chocolat*, which since then got itself nominated for the Whitbread Award in England (though sadly it lost, but not to the Harry Potter books, which would at least have made Harris's daughter happy) and is being filmed in France with Juliette Binoche playing the lead. I'm hopeful they'll do a good job on the film and because of it, hordes of people will seek out the original book to find out where that story came from.

But in the meantime, you and I, more in the know, will have moved on to her new novel *Blackberry Wine*.

It's the story of Jay Mackintosh, an author who wrote one best-selling novel, *Three Summers with Jackapple Joe*, and then was never able to repeat that success. The book was based on his experiences as a boy when he was sent to live in Upper Kirby with his grandparents for the summer holidays while his parents went through their divorce. Playing the model grandson at home, whenever he was able, Mackintosh snuck off to nearby Nether Edge, a no man's land by the railroad tracks, filled with refuse and wood thickets. There when he wasn't exploring, he'd play his radio, smoke cigarettes, and read comics — just waiting for the summer to end.

Until he meets Jackapple Joe, an old man who seems filled with magic and lives in nearby Pog Hill, growing vegetables and making wine and telling endless stories of his travels around the world.

Summer now becomes a wonderful adventure, but eventually Mackintosh grows up, Joe disappears, and all that magic seems like no more than a cruel joke.

When the books opens, with a lovely chapter told from the point

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of view of a bottle of wine in Mackintosh's cellar (trust me, this works), Mackintosh is much older, living in London and making a living writing bad sf novels. On a whim he opens one of the six bottles of "Specials," a wine that Jackapple Joe made and all that Mackintosh now has to remember him by.

There is magic in the wine, as there is in much of this book — secret, subtle enchantment. Inspired by that magic, Mackintosh ups and buys a rundown vineyard near the village of Lansquenet (an unknown place to him, but familiar to those of us who have read *Chocolat*) and leaves the next day to take possession.

The novel switches back and forth between the two Mackintoshs — the boy spending his summers in Upper Kirby and the man making a new life for himself in Lansquenet where he rediscovers his ability to write the kind of book he wants to write. The thread between the two is Jackapple Joe who is as large as life in the boy's life, and reappears in the man's as a ghost.

Glancing back on what I've written above, I realize that there's no easy way to do justice to the curious mix of simplicity and complexity that is a Harris novel. What we have here is a coming-of-age story combined with a mid-life crisis. There is high drama in the boy's life — all events are drama in adolescence — as he combats bullies and learns to make friends. There is a rich sensual feast in the man's story as he strives to make a new life for himself in a small French village, renovating the farmhouse, planting gardens, and trying to adjust to the slower pace of country life, and the curious lack of privacy that is part and parcel of small towns everywhere. And then there's the ghost of Jackapple Joe, who when he was alive, helped the boy to grow and then apparently deserted him, and with whom Mackintosh must now complete unfinished business.

And with all that said, I realize I haven't even begun to talk about the mysterious woman renting the vineyards next door, shunned by the villagers, but to whom Mackintosh is quickly attracted. Or the commercial intrusion of Mackintosh's old life in London. And remember those magical bottles of wine I mentioned earlier in this review? Well, they have parts to play as well — both Jackapple Joe's Specials and that occasional narrator, a bottle of Feleurie, 1962. But I'll let you discover all of that on your own. You won't regret it.

The language and the spell of

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Harris's characters are such that this, like *Chocolat*, is a novel one will return to again and again, as we do with those books that become our old and dear friends.

Conspiracies, by F. Paul Wilson, Forge Books, 2000, $24.95.

Conspiracies turns the Repairman Jack books into a trilogy, although you don't need to have read either *The Tomb* (1984) or *Legacies* (1998) to be able enjoy it.

This time around Jack — the adjective is attached to his name because he "fixes" people's problems — is hired to find a missing woman whose husband received a message from her through his TV set telling him that, "Only Repairman Jack can find me. Only he will understand." Though he thinks his client is flaky, and he's never heard of the woman before, Jack's intrigued and takes on the case.

His search takes him to a convention of conspiracy theorists in New York which provides some comic relief as Jack meets a few of the attendees and hears their theories. But to be fair, while Jack provides a cynical point of view to the proceedings, Wilson writes the characters straight and presents their cases without mockery.

All of which is fascinating to Jack, except it's not bringing him any closer to finding his client's wife. It's around this point that the threads of conspiracy theories start leading back to the rakoshi demons of the first book and the broadcast power technology of *Legacies* and Jack finds himself confronting a literal black hole in a small New Jersey town that threatens to swallow not only him, but the rest of the world while it's at it.

Conspiracies doesn't really build on the Repairman Jack mythos, by which I mean we're not given much new about the character and he doesn't really go through any changes. But it's an entertaining read, with engaging characters and a plot that twists and turns, though it all makes sense in the end.

Sometimes, that's all we need from a novel, and Wilson delivers it here.

Lord of Emperors, by Guy Gavriel Kay, HarperPrism, 2000, $24.

Lord of Emperors is the second of a two-book series entitled *The Sarantine Mosaic*.

In the first novel, *Sailing to Sarantium* (1998), we meet Crispin,

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a mosaicist whose mentor Martinian was invited to the imperial capital of Sarantium to create a mosaic on the dome of a new cathedral raised in honor of the Emperor. Martinian felt too old to make the trip himself, so Crispin assumed his identity and went in his mentor's place.

After a long, perilous journey, Crispin finally arrived in the capital. Hoping to immerse himself in the challenges of the immense mosaic to be created upon the dome, he was, instead, drawn into the deadly intrigues of the court and the ongoing rivalry between the factions of the Blues and Greens, opposing teams of charioteers that divide the city in a way that Crispin had never seen before and didn't understand.

When *Lord of Emperors* opens, Crispin is still in the royal city, working on the mosaic of the emperor's magnificent sanctuary. He remains far more concerned with his art than the ambitions and intrigues surrounding him, but events conspire to steal him away from his precious mosaic, involving him once again in the political maneuverings of emperors and kings.

While Crispin remains the central character, *Lord of Emperors* sports as large a cast as the earlier book. There are returning characters such as the young Queen Gisel from Crispin's homeland of Varena, the Emperor Valerius and his wife, and Crispin's old traveling companion, Carullus. But one of the most intriguing is a new one: the physician Rustem of Kerakek, who plays the part of the innocent amongst the ever-increasing confusion and violence that comes to a head in Sarantium. He survives as much by luck as anything else, making him a fine counterpoint to Crispin who, albeit reluctantly, faces up to his challenges decisively, with a clever wit and a strong sense of honor.

It's a curious beast that Kay has created here. *Lord of Emperors* isn't a fantasy novel, though a small handful of supernatural elements do make it on to the stage at various points in the narrative. And since the entire story is set in a world that never was, it's not exactly an historical novel either.

His Sarantium is based on the East Roman Empire of Byzantium (the Greek word for Constantinople) in the early-to-mid-sixth century, an era Kay also mined for *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (1995) which was set in alternate medieval Spain. The culture, the customs, the architecture, the chariot racing, the complicated courtly intrigues, all echo our

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own world's Byzantium during the reign of Justinian and Theodora, and I doubt any history buff would be disappointed by Kay's take on it.

By setting his novels in a world strongly reminiscent of Byzantium, rather than the actual historical empire, Kay has freed himself and his readers from the expectations with which we might otherwise have come to the book. It allows him to rewrite history as we know it so that he can play out the struggle of his characters as best suits the requirements of his story and imagination, and it allows us to approach the era with a fresh gaze.

As Kay says in a recent interview in *Locus*, "What I've been specifically interested in is how the examination of themes and trends, moments in history, can be *intensified* by dealing with them through fantasy. Not softened, not fudged, but sharpened."

Looking back on his career, it's easy to see how Kay has come to concentrate on fantasies based upon themes of history. Like many authors drawn to the literature of the fantastic, he wrote the obligatory Tolkienesque novel, in his case a fantasy trilogy called *The Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-1986).

But one could already see Kay's need to explore other literary terrain when his next novel, *Tigana* (1990), appeared. By the time *A Song for Arbonne* was published in 1992, obviously based upon a medieval Provence that never was, it was apparent that Kay had done what the best writers always do, and that was stake out his own territory in the landscape of literature.

In the hands of a lesser writer, Kay's ambitious novels might easily be an embarrassment, a few more awkward alternate histories, thinly disguised as fantasy since the author either didn't, or couldn't, be bothered to do his research. But Kay's books ring with authenticity. They are literate and imaginative, and work on many levels. History aficionados will delight in all the small and telling insights Kay brings to the era and its cultures, while other readers will simply delight in the grand sweep of the story, the rich characterization, and Kay's sheer gift with language.

The conclusion of *The Sarantine Mosaic* is very satisfying and no exception to the success of the rest of Kay's body of work.

Forever Free, by Joe Haldeman, Ace, 2000, $21.95

I don't read nearly as much science fiction as I probably should.

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I'm not sure why. But I do know that, when the urge strikes me, I tend to gravitate toward the masters of the field. Being as far behind as I am, I might as well read the best when I'm doing my catch-up.

Which is what had me pick out *Forever Free* from the pile of review books that leans precariously against a bookshelf in my office that's already stuffed to overflowing with more of the same.

Haldeman isn't prolific, and he rarely returns to a previous book's setting, so each new title of his is to be anticipated and approached with the knowing that this will be something new. Such remains the case with *Forever Free*, for all that it's a sequel to his classic *The Forever War* (1974). The connection between the two is almost beside the point, the books are so dissimilar. The latter is a science fictional portrait of the Vietnam experience while the new book is from the viewpoint of a middle-aged veteran to whom the war is still an immediate memory where for most people it is now old history.

Our viewpoint character is William Mandella, who, along with a number of other veterans of the Forever War, has settled on the planet known as Middle Finger. The war is long over. The enemy, the Taurans, are now allies. And most humans are choosing to become a new, "improved" form of humanity known as Man, who look normal, but are connected to a group mind and all look and act the same, always calm and unstressed.

Because the Taurans and Man have control over the humans, Mandella can't help but feel like a captive, for all that their rule appears benign. He hatches a plan to hijack an antiquated shuttle and take a long-term trip, right out of the galaxy. To tell you more would spoil far too many surprises, but rest assured that *Forever Free* is everything good science fiction should be but so often isn't: a grand adventure into what it means to be human, told through rich characterization and thoughtful scientific (not to mention religious) speculation that doesn't lag for a moment.

Most people have a need to make sense of this existence we all share, an existence that, in the long run, often doesn't appear to have any real meaning. Haldeman lets his characters in on a possible explanation, and the ensuing argument is riveting.

The Frank Collection, by Jane and Howard Frank. Paper Tiger, 1999, $24.95.

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Possible Futures, edited by Dorit Yaron, The Art Gallery, 2000, $20.

The publication of these two books, both centering around the collection of fantasy and sf art of Jane and Howard Frank, are a perfect example of the sharp contrast between academic and commercial views of the same subject.

Possible Futures, the book, is the catalogue for an exhibition called *Possible Futures: Science Fiction Art from The Frank Collection* that will be touring through various U.S. cities during 2000. It features six thoughtful essays, placing sf art in the context of the larger art world, as well as reproductions of many of the paintings in the exhibition.

The Frank Collection also features that art, but here the paintings themselves are the focus. Where most of the reproductions in the other book are quite small, nesting in pages thick with text, here the paintings spread out on the pages, often taking them over completely. The text is a breezy walk-through of the Frank home, describing the various paintings, where they hang, how they were acquired.

The art itself, taken as a whole, is schizophrenic to say the least. It ranges from old pulp and paperback covers that can seem quaint through to the super-realism of contemporary work. There are also some wonderful monochromic drawings. The subject matter too is catch-as-catch-can: hard sf, high and heroic fantasy, horror.

Which book is better? It depends upon your own interests and perspectives, I suppose. I find they seem to complement each other. I was more interested in reading what the academics had to say than where in the Frank home a painting hung, but I appreciated the larger reproductions in the Paper Tiger edition more than the smaller, less-vibrant versions to be found in The Art Gallery edition.

But the best thing would be to take in the show at a gallery, or finagle a way into the Franks' house to see the paintings once they've finished their wanderings as part of the exhibition and have returned once more to the walls where they are normally to be found.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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MUSING ON BOOKS

MICHELLE WEST

The Fifth Elephant, by Terry Pratchett, HarperCollins, 2000, $24.

Heart of Gold, by Sharon Shinn, Ace, 2000, $14.95.

The Tower at Stony Wood, by Patricia A. McKillip, Ace, 2000, $22.95.

IF TERRY Pratchett is not yet an Institution — as distinctly opposed to being put on the inside of one — he should be. The Discworld canon occupies two bookshelves in a store when the volumes are spined for minimal shelf crowding, and there are yearbooks (well, three that I know of), T-shirts, art portfolios, two computer games, and the animated Discworld adventures (of which I've only seen Wyrd Sisters) which is pretty faithful to the novels but, owing to the inability to capture Pratchett's descriptive turn of phrase, is not nearly as good.

I digress. Pratchett does this to me. Where was I? Ah yes, Discworld. Pratchett's manic creation, the patch of geography about which he says "There are no maps. You can't map a sense of humor." (Although I believe there are at least two maps, so some brave soul has certainly *tried*).

I have previously stated that books concerning the Watch are my favorite, for reasons of Samuel Vimes, the closest person Discworld has to a smart everyman (as opposed to Lord Vetinari who is a smart, perfect despot with his heart in the right place [his chest]) and Captain Carrot, the closest person Discworld has to a perfect person. The problem with favorite characters — from any perspective — is that they can grow stale with age.

The longevity of Discworld rests upon Pratchett's ability to let his characters change, while preserving some of the essential nature that made them so intriguing in the first place — which is probably

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harder to do in something of a comedic nature than it is in a serious character study. Samuel Vimes has progressed from an alcoholic (well, a drunk, as you have to have money to be an alcoholic, according to Vimes) cynic to a married, honorable, and even self-respecting cynic. He has also, in every novel that features the Watch, managed to get himself promoted, moving to Captain, Commander, Sir (as in Knight) and His Grace (as in Duke). I'd wondered what would follow afterward, since there aren't really many more ways that he could be exalted — although in truth being Captain and Commander are a lot more valuable to Vimes than the pomp and circumstance of the less functionai entitlements of becoming a Noble.

In a sideways move, Vimes is sent to be a diplomat at a most important ceremony — the coronation of a new Low King in Uberwald, ancestral land of dwarves, vampires, and werewolves. Vimes and diplomacy are not opposites. Well, not in practice, at any rate, although the Vimes brand of diplomacy is perhaps what you'd expect, given that he's Vimes. The dwarves in Uberwald are *real* dwarves, not these modern deserters who have moved, whole hog, to Ankh-Morpork and forgotten the old ways. They resent Ankh-Morpork for stealing both their people *and* devaluing the customs that define dwarfdom — but they need their money. As usual, Pratchett keeps his humor grounded in the day-to-day reality of life in the modern world.

Did I mention werewolves? Angua, a member of the Watch who was originally supposed to serve the function of a Visible Minority (along with a troll, a dwarf, and a zombie), is a werewolf. She is also the significant other of one Captain Carrot, and when she disappears without a trace, Carrot resigns his commission to pursue her — straight into the arms of her family. In Uberwald. It seems that werewolves and dwarves have got together to do something with the Scone of Stone that would cause chaos, war, and death — which is pretty much what you'd expect in a land where they take on faith the idea that werewolves and vampires will behave themselves on the condition that garlic isn't grown and silver isn't mined.

Nothing is as it seems, of course, and Vimes's instincts as a member of the Watch — which generally means, in the end, the ability to intelligently survive anything, if

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only by the seat of his pants — is a sheer joy to read about.

The most promising development in the book has nothing to do with the plot; but it does answer the question, What Is Pratchett Going To Do To Keep Vimes's Life Interesting Since He's Run Out of Titles?

I'd love to spoil it, but I won't.

Suffice it to say that Sybil goes along with Vimes as a diplomatic wife; that she plays a significant role in the action, and that there is much — as usual — to chew on after you've finished laughing and closed the covers of the book with that warm and silly glow you get after you've been grinning for a bit too long. Pratchett never preaches, and I don't think I've heard him say one serious thing about Discworld, but the reason Discworld works so well for *me* is that I *do* end up chewing over the bits and pieces of philosophy and earnest (I use that word with some hesitance, but I do think it appropriate) struggle that make up the interior life of Vimes as he struggles to be the best person he can be in a world in which best is never quite what you'd hoped for.

If you like the Watch, this book is one of the best Discworld novels to hit the shelves in a while.

* * *

I've read every novel that Sharon Shinn has written, and I've liked them all. She's not a Tepper or a Sargent; she balances the mechanics of world-building with the romance and adventure that make a novel a good read, rather than a spiky, painful one. This doesn't mean that there are no ambiguities in her works, or that the books themselves are black and white — but it does mean that you aren't going to walk away with a depressing vision of nihilism and despair. That said, *Heart of Gold* has the *most* obviously romantic of the covers with which Shinn's work has been blessed (and I use that word advisedly in this case) to date, and although there is some romance, it is one of her books in which romance, or the romantic tropes, are least prominent. Having started with the cover, let me add that were the author any other author, I wouldn't have touched the book because I would have assumed that it had been misfiled — to the harried eye of a parent trying to hold onto a small child or two while grabbing for something that appeals, the cover suggests a Regency Romance, although on closer inspection the details are off. If for some reason the blurb or the cover make you think twice, think a third time

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and remember that the author doesn't get to choose either the cover or the back ad copy.

As in the Pratchett — and this is perhaps the only thing, other than quality, that these two books share in common, but as a reviewer the commonality of what I've read tends to leap out when I'm writing a column — Shinn's novel deals with the changes that come to a society when it is exposed to, and blended with, a different one. This book is about a time when morals that were cast in stone have lost their relevance to the modern generation, and transgressions against a certain sense of racial purity have become thinkable, and possibly even acceptable.

Nolan Adelpho is a scientist of the indigo people, and a high born one at that. His world is Indigo; he has the natural disdain for both the lower born members of his own race and the native gulden, the world's working underclass. Kitrini Solvano is one of the indigo people as well — but the two could not be farther apart. Raised by a philosopher father to question all privilege and to view the gulden as equals, Kitrini has chosen, in love and in life, to live among the people her race despises, to dedicate herself to the cause of equality and justice.

Both Nolan and Kitrini are involved with people they love passionately — and we see both of those relationships and how they formed and changed these two characters. But we also see what happens when they collide, and in collision, how they question everything that they've accepted as truths — for both of their truths are absolute and strident, even Kitrini's, with whom we readers instantly sympathize. When terrorism starts escalating into the beginnings of a biological warfare that will be the death of one race, Nolan and Kitrini are thrown together. Shinn plays up the attraction between the two protagonists without insulting the intelligence and dedication of either to their lives and causes as they are forced to examine themselves and the people they thought they knew and loved.

In the end, they each have to make a choice — but again, that choice has very little to do with what they feel for each other; they redefine what they value, and why. I'm not a cynic, exactly — but I'm not really a Romantic in the modern sense of that word; I firmly believe that giving someone dying plants as a gesture of love and affection is a completely nonsensical act. So I like books in which I can be

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happy that two people are drawn together and still behave like *themselves* instead of hormonal teens while they struggle with concepts and truths with which they would probably have had to struggle anyway in order to grow.

Shinn has produced another successful novel, and if you're looking for something to read in which you can root for both sides of a great divide, this is a sure bet.

A new Patricia McKillip novel is always cause for celebration. There is something about McKillip's evocative use of language and imagery that *is* fantasy in its purest form: lyrical and mythic. Everything she writes has the power to enchant, sometimes with ease and grace, sometimes with the rewarding difficulty that penetrating a mystery involves.

The Tower at Stony Wood is her newest novel, and it is a tapestry—a weaving of disparate threads into whole cloth that is greater than its parts, which when seen singly only hint at the finished weave if one is paying attention and dissecting as one goes. The viewpoints alternate among Cyan Dag, a knight of the realm of Gloinmere who has been sent on a terrifying journey to find a Queen in a tower and rescue her, thus saving his much-loved King; Thayne Ysse, a prince of a broken, defeated realm, who desires freedom for his people; and Melanthos, a woman who is entranced by the visions she sees in an ancient mirror, and is compelled to embroider those things she sees, those glimpsed stories with their half-endings. McKillip leads us into a wilderness of magic that reminds a reader that magic is dangerous, profound, unpredictable. Here, as they say, there be dragons, and they will hollow you with the fire of their breath, pierce you with their claws, destroy you with your own desires.

If a story is a structure that makes sense out of chaos, that tames, that explains, that soothes the edges of dream or nightmare by making it solid, McKillip is that rarest of things: a storyteller who does all this without losing sight of the things she seeks to invoke. She can remind us of the depths of longing and wilderness that lurk beneath the conformities of our daily life, while at the same time celebrating the heroic effort it takes to live that daily life, to choose, again and again, the things that affirm life: Love, responsibility, compassion.

Let me just say that again, because in the end, I'm a reader who

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looks for such things in the books I read: wisdom and clarity, and an understanding of how difficult it is to offer these things in a world that moves so quickly and sees askew. Love. Responsibility. Compassion.

This is probably the most emotionally accessible novel McKillip has written in a while, but for all that, it's a rose with thorns; it is never quite comfortable, and yet, in spite of that, it is comforting.

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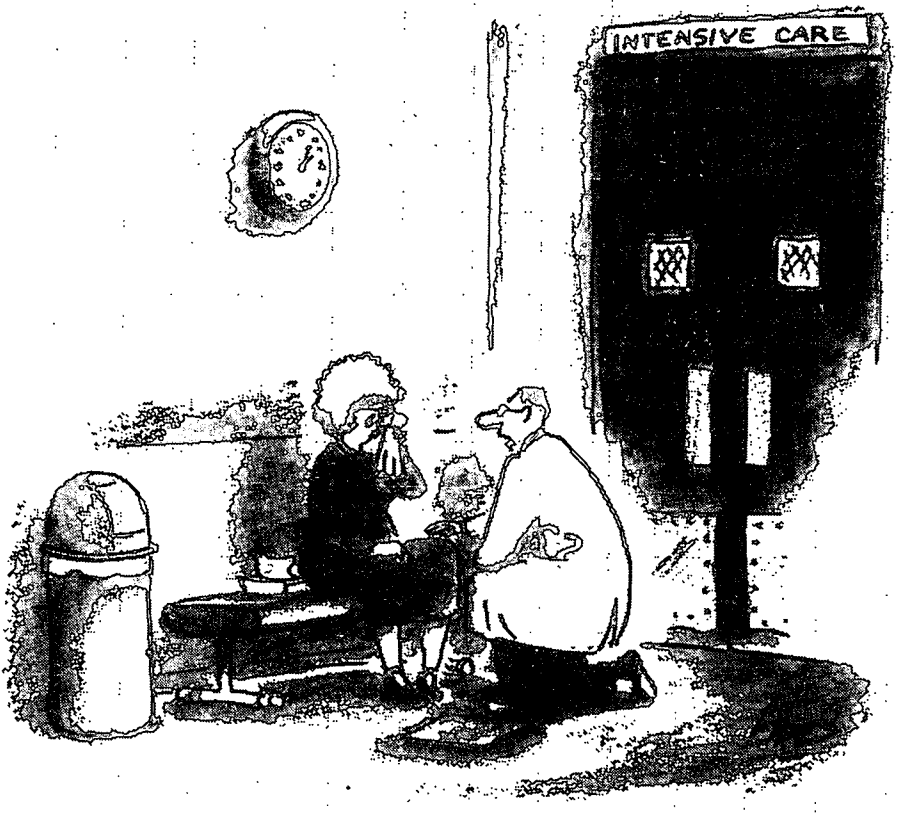

"In fact, his condition has improved so much that I'm going to have to ask you for the death certificate back."

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Over the course of the 1990s, Kate Wilhelm published nine novels, two collections of short stories, and one omnibus volume of her "Constance and Charlie" novels. Here in the year 2000, she has published another omnibus volume, a new novel in her series of Barbara Holloway legal thrillers, and a second novel entitled The Deepest Water *is due out any time now. Her editor reports that he received the manuscript of* another *novel just this week—let's hope we'll see that one in 2001.*

Meantime, we're happy that Ms. Wilhelm still finds time between novels to spin out yarns like the one before us now.

Earth's Blood

By Kate Wilhelm

MORT KNEW I NEEDED THE job, probably knew almost to the penny how little I had in my checking account, or he never would have made such an offer. Two hundred a day plus expenses. A professional photographer's rate was two hundred an hour plus expenses. Times were tough. I said okay.

"It's a honey of a scenario," he said with enthusiasm in his messy office. The walls were covered with old photographs of Mort and celebrities, old buddies, old pals, old starlets.... His desk was piled high with papers that looked as if they hadn't been disturbed since the last big tremor hit L.A. He was fat and red-faced, drinking soda from a can. "See, this drop-dead gorgeous chick is running away and gets car trouble near a ghost town. So she hikes in, thinking it's got people. And weird things start to happen."

"Giant Gila monsters," I suggested.

He shook his head emphatically. "No monsters, no chain saws, no blood and guts spilling out. Not that kind of picture. Psychological stuff. Know what I mean?"

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What he meant was that he couldn't get near a budget that would provide for special effects.

"What's she running from?"

"Don't worry about it. Something nasty, a badass husband maybe, or a repo guy, something people can identify with. Maybe she embezzled a little at the bank, something like that. I'll get Myra to work on it." Myra was his favorite script writer, also his wife.

"Is there a shower scene?"

"Don't be a wiseguy, Jackson. What I want from you is a ghost town with a few standing buildings and lots of shadows. For Christ's sake, no contrails! Our gal is gorgeous, appealing, wholesome, not twitchy or anything like that, but suggestible, in a state of nerves. Weird things happen and it turns out that the ghost town has ghosts, or maybe it does. Know what I mean?" He chugged the rest of the soda and tossed the can into the wastebasket, no recycler he. "Not a ghost town that's been done to death, something fresh and new...."

Ten days later I was tooling along on a ranch road somewhere in Oregon, but I already knew this wouldn't be the one. Too isolated and remote. Mort liked a real town nearby with a decent bar, halfway decent food, and there hadn't been anything like that for many miles, but I kept going. I had three ghost towns in the can, get one more site on film, on videotape, and then head for home, that was my plan. Two weeks, twenty-eight hundred dollars plus expenses. I needed the money; Betsy needed body work.

Betsy was in good shape except for a long dent in the passenger side, not too bad, but an eyesore. Someone had ploughed into her at the studio parking lot, and my insurance had a thousand dollar deductible. Betsy had started life as a school bus for a private high school. The school went belly up and when everything went on the auction block, I talked my dad into buying Betsy for my high-school graduation present. He had intended to buy me a car, but I wanted Betsy. And I started fixing her up right away. Seats out, blackout curtains in, a sink, toilet and shower, mini refrigerator, two-burner stove.... For a long time she had been my studio and darkroom, and now she was my home. For a while there had been two narrow beds, but after Jeanne split, I took hers out, and had just my own

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bed, my own gear, clothes, books. Home. We had been through a lot together, Betsy and I, twelve years now and going strong.

I missed Jeanne sometimes, not often anymore, but now and then when I was out like this, scouting out a location. She had been fun, traveling with her had been fun. Homecoming queen, newspaper photographer, we had clicked from the start, and from the start she had pitched her scheme of taking Betsy to Hollywood where I would land a job in a big studio and she would start up the ladder to stardom in the movies. She was on her way, despite short detours through the bedrooms of various directors and producers, and I had learned that there were as many photographers in Hollywood as there were dopeheads, maybe more. *C'est la vie!*

I had left a county road for a ranch road, and any month now I should be leaving that for a track that would take me to a ghost town that had no name, just Ghost Town on the map. But I was losing faith in the turnoff as well as the town. The dirt road curved around boulders, crossed dry washes, straddled impressive ruts, and apparently was endless. I really didn't care. If I came to the turnoff, I would take it; if I didn't, I'd stop eventually, get out for a hike, take a few pictures for Mort's benefit, to prove I had tried, eat and sleep, and in the morning head back out. Since this site was a wash anyway it made little difference.

People kept telling me I had a problem — my folks, Jeanne, another girlfriend or two, in various words with the same message: No ambition. Drifter. Lazy. Shiftless. Indifferent. And there I was being indifferent again.

I was surrounded on all sides by mesas, buttes, and mountains; some of the slopes were forested, but where I was driving the sage was gray or dun-colored, the ground gray or dun, dust everywhere, no trees at all. It could have been the plains of the Serengeti before the animals wandered in.

Then the turnoff showed up, a barely visible track off to the left; it hadn't been used in half a century from all appearances. It angled down out of sight, not too steep, but with a blind curve it needed caution. I paid attention to the track until it straightened out again, and then I slowed even more and finally stopped.

I had come to a valley, like a cul-de-sac, with rising, rocky ground on

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both sides and behind me, and a butte at the far end, about a mile away. Midway in the valley was the ghost town. And behind it, looming over it, the forested butte would eclipse the sun, and its shadow would creep across the intervening space until it enwrapped the town, hastening twilight in that one small pocket while the sun still shone everywhere else.

After the dust settled around Betsy I got out to watch the sun dip behind the butte, and it was exactly what I had expected; the butte was flattened on top, and its shadow was like a black wall advancing, swallowing everything in its path. That was deceptive, I knew, an artifact of distance and the contrast of the glaring world and the deep shadow, but it would appear on videotape exactly the way I had envisioned it and then witnessed it. I didn't take any photographs or get out any equipment; first I would scout the area, find the best place to set up, but I knew precisely the shots I wanted, the video I wanted.

IT WAS DARK everywhere by the time I finished looking over the ghost town and made dinner. One ghost town is like another, a few buildings without windows or doors most of the time, some falling down, some standing, some pretending to be whole only to have the entire back side gone to dust.... There was nothing exceptional about this town, desolation, ruins, dust everywhere, sand piled up in corners, wind whistling through chinks in the wooden frames. They came, built, eventually left. There was no mystery why they left; what was there to keep them here? The mystery was why they had come in the first place. Miners? Scouring the surrounding buttes for gold or silver?

I slept out under the stars that night and listened to the howls and yaps of coyotes, the screech of an owl, the flap of wings of something that was silent otherwise. The first light had me wide awake and as the brightness increased, meadowlarks sang. Nice, I thought. Very nice.

That morning I shot three rolls of film, velvety morning shadows, silvered wood turning golden in the crisp morning sunlight, dust swirls that looked solid where the sunlight touched them. Good stuff. Moving cautiously I videotaped the interior of a couple of the buildings, a saloon, a post office or something like that, shacks....

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Later on I would find a good place to videotape the shadow that ate the ghost town, get some stills in the glare of midday, and in the first light of the next day climb the butte and videotape the town emerging from night. Get the shadows coming and going, I was thinking as I removed the cap from my telephoto camera, planning to use the long lens to scout the butte for a trail up. If miners had been here, they would have left a trail up the butte, I reasoned, and my 1000mm focal length would let me find a trace of it even if it hadn't been used for half a century. I set up the camera on a window sill of one of the ruined buildings to search. It did not look promising: steep, rocky, with basalt columns, rimrock, and in the upper reaches sparse forests. I kept searching, and then stopped.

A woman! About three quarters of the way to the top, in a relatively flat place that appeared to be solid basalt, a woman was rising from a kneeling position. She moved with deliberate slowness, evidently in pain. Upright, she rubbed her lower back, swayed a little, then began to walk, limping badly, almost dragging one leg. When she reached a tree she grasped it and leaned against it for several seconds. She drew herself away from the tree, turned and looked down at the ghost town, looked at me, and she waved. She vanished behind the trees then.

I didn't know how many shots of her I had taken, all by reflex. "What the hell was that all about?" I muttered. She couldn't have seen me from up there. I was inside a building, out of the sun that was already threatening to turn the little cul-de-sac into an inferno before the day was much older. The butte was half a mile away; she had been up at least a thousand feet. And she had waved. At the town, not at me, I decided uneasily.

I went about my various chores, ate lunch in one of the desolate buildings, then hiked until I found a spot that would be fine for videotaping the shadow that eats the ghost town, and made my way back to Betsy, but I kept eyeing the butte.

Using binoculars this time to find a trail, I decided a frontal approach was out of the question. Six to eight feet straight up, basalt. I followed the rimrock until it started to narrow, and eventually was hidden by low-growing sage. I told myself I had to scout the area, see what all I could pack in on the following morning in the dim light before the sun began to cast shadows on the town. I told myself I was not looking for the woman, who

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obviously was hurt and in no shape to be on the mountain alone. What if she had fallen? What if a bear came across her? Nothing, I told myself sharply. All I was interested in was whether I could take the video camera and two still cameras, water, sandwiches....

I put a couple of apples in my daypack, added some chocolate bars, an extra bottle of water, clipped water to my belt, and I started. It wasn't as hard as I had feared; every time I thought I couldn't get any higher, I found another way, and gradually I climbed up, first through some juniper trees and finally to a sparse, mixed forest of pine and junipers, up to the point where the rough terrain leveled a bit, overlooking Ghost Town. This was where she had been.

The ledge was a good place to observe the town, I thought glumly, but a rotten place to try to get pictures when the sun rose. It would blaze the town, and be like a spotlight up here. I dropped my daypack in the shade of a pine tree and surveyed the area critically. Farther north, I decided, not here. The basalt was not solid, as it had appeared from below. There was rimrock four or five feet wide, then a depression filled with dirt, and more basalt. A few wild flowers struggled in the pocket of soil, dead looking now, but no doubt they bloomed in early spring, and just hung on the rest of the time. The basalt was skillet hot.

Keeping under the pine trees I began to skirt the edge of the butte, which made an angular curve around the town. Sometimes going deeper into woods, then back to a view of the valley, I explored until I found a place where the sun would hit me at an angle, and, satisfied, I turned to go back.

When the basalt ledge came into sight, I stopped again. *She* was there, kneeling in the pocket of dirt. She must have heard me at the same moment I saw her; she looked up, startled, frightened. Her face was dirty and sweaty, her clothes were filthy, a tan shirt with a tear in the sleeve and a bedraggled shirt tail, khaki pants that looked like army issue, and heavy boots. Her hair was black and short, her eyes bright blue, and she looked wild and beautiful. At her side was a black pack twice as big as my daypack. With a swift motion that appeared involuntary, she snatched her pack, drew it to her and held it.

"Relax," I said, not moving, afraid of startling her even more. "I'm peaceful. Where did you come from? What are you doing up here?"

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She glanced about desperately, then said, "Looking at the penstemons."

"The flowers?"

She nodded.

It was a lie, but I didn't challenge it. "That's my stuff over there. I won't come near you, but just go over there and sit down. Okay?"

"Of course," she whispered. "I'll leave now."

"No. I mean, I'll be on my way, leave you in peace. But I want to sit down in the shade first, maybe eat an apple, have a drink of water. Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm all right." She struggled to her feet, and again her pain was evident. She moved as if every bit of her body ached, and when she was finally upright, she swayed, as she had done before.

I ran to her, grabbed her arm, then drew her to the shade of the pine tree, and eased her to the ground.

"You are not all right," I said, sitting by her. Up close I saw that she was older than I had assumed, forty maybe. I handed her a water bottle. She gazed at it for a few moments, and when I lifted the other one to my mouth and drank, she did, also.

"Are you alone up here?" I asked then.

"No. No. We have a camp over there." She motioned toward the forest behind us. Another lie, I thought.

"Want an apple?" I brought out two apples from my pack and offered her one. "You should rest a few minutes before you hobble back to your camp," I said when she hesitated, gazing at the apple. She took it and bit into it, and closed her eyes. Painful to eat? Or just starving? I couldn't tell. Neither of us spoke again as we ate the apples.

I found the chocolate bars and handed her one. "I'm Jackson Betz," I said.

"Oh! You're — " I waited. "The photographer," she finished lamely, but her look was penetrating as she examined me. Then she turned her attention to the chocolate bar.

So she had seen me earlier, I thought, watching her unwrap the candy with such infinite care it might have been the most precious thing she had ever handled. Starved, I decided. "Have you had anything to eat today?"

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She shook her head and started on the candy and, seeing how she went at it, I decided to let her have the other one too. "I'll bring your pack over," I said and got up to retrieve it.

At the basalt I gazed down at the valley, at Ghost Town, then shook my head. How had she been able to make out a figure in the shade down there? Eagle eyes? I knew she had not used binoculars. But she must have seen me and the camera; God knew the name Jackson Betz meant nothing to anyone on earth except me and my folks. I picked up her backpack and wondered what she was lugging around; it was very heavy. I took it to the shade and sat down again.

"You a botanist?" I asked, handing her the other candy bar.

"No." She looked at the dried flowers, and quickly said, "Just an amateur." She unwrapped the candy and started to eat it with the same intent expression as before.

"But you have a name," I suggested.

She smiled. There was chocolate on her teeth. "Maria," she said.

"And I'm Jackson. But, Maria, you are in no shape to be hiking on this mountain. In a little bit I'll take you back to your camp. Okay?"

"No. I'm really well. I was hungry, and the heat...I fell, and I am sore, but nothing of importance. It is quite all right."

"Maria, I saw you walking, dragging your foot. You could have a broken bone, a sprain — "

Gunshots, three in a row, blasted the silence. They echoed and reechoed from the hills and rocks, sourceless. Alarmed, I sprang up, thinking someone was shooting up Betsy. If I was alarmed, then Maria was panic-stricken. She dropped the candy bar she had not yet finished, and clutched her backpack tight against her, as if it might protect her from bullets. At the ledge, I saw that the valley below was as quiet and uninhabited as ever, the ghost town was as isolated as ever; Betsy was untouched. I turned back to Maria in relief. She was gone.

Not hobbling around in the woods with people firing rifles, I prayed, and started to look for her. I called her name, and went into the woods behind the tree we had been sitting under. She could not have gone far, not with that heavy pack, and the shape she was in, but I couldn't see a sign of her, or hear the sound of someone dragging a pack through the understory of dry grass and sage.

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I looked for a long time before I gave it up and returned to the ledge filled with frustration mixed with fury and then uneasiness when I considered that not only had I not found a trace of her leaving, I had not seen where she had come from, a trail to the ledge. I'm no Daniel Boone, admittedly, but neither was I blind to broken down grass, and there had been none until I did the damage myself.

I looked at the patch of dirt, twenty feet by two or three at the most, and it told me nothing. She must have been scrabbling in it here and there; at least in spots the dirt looked looser than in other spots. Looking for seeds? I kicked a dead flower, grabbed my daypack, slung it on, added the half-eaten chocolate bar, and headed back to Ghost Town, back to Betsy, rewriting Mort's scenario as I went.

This guy comes into a ghost town, and weird things start to happen....

It was four thirty when I got back to town, hot, tired, mean as a rattlesnake, mad as a wet cat, and nobody to yell at or punch out. I prowled around the ruins a little, kicked some boards and watched a wall tumble down, and then sat down and glared at the butte. It was much too early to go to my chosen spot to videotape the shadow that eats everything in its path, too late to take a nap, too hot to move; I just sat and glared at the butte. So she had woods smarts, more than I did, and she could elude me without trouble. Dragging a bad leg, and probably a fifty-pound backpack? *Yes*, I snarled in my silent dialogue.

I set up the Nikon on the window sill I had used before, focused on the ledge, and every once in a while I scanned it, getting madder at her and myself each time.

I dozed, roused, scanned the ledge again, and finally roused and stood up. I moved Betsy out of range of the video, put the digital tape in the video camera, and thought briefly about making some dinner, decided not to. Too hot. I examined the butte again, more as a token gesture than anything else, I thought, since there was nothing to see. But there was.

I saw her emerge from a shadow and walk to the pocket of dirt. She had cleaned herself up, put on clean clothes, the same kind of khaki pants and shirt she had worn earlier, but with the shirt tail tucked in neatly. She was very slender. And she must have taken a massive dose of pain killer, or else she had been putting on a superb act before. She walked easily, with grace, the pack strapped on her back causing her no apparent strain. She glanced

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around, took off the pack and laid it down, and then she knelt, the way she had done before. I couldn't see her hands, but I thought she might be digging.

I was snapping one picture after another as fast as my hands and the camera would work. She stopped moving her hands, and looked up, faced away from me, swinging her head wildly from side to side. She jumped up, grabbed the backpack, and started to run, then came to a dead stop as a man with a rifle stepped out of the shadows of trees. She spun around and ran the other way, and there was a shot. Another man appeared, also armed with a rifle. She was being hemmed in. She started to come down the face of the butte. I dashed out of the building, waving my arms, yelling, and began to run toward her.

She scrambled for footing, clutching the pack with one hand, grabbing rocks, sage, whatever she could reach with the other, and she was sliding. She caught herself, paused a moment, then continued. There was another shot, off to my right. I half turned, in time to see another armed man standing on a high rock. He fired again, not at the butte, but straight up, and I kept running. The men on the ledge had vanished.

Maria was descending more cautiously now, testing her footing, but there was no good way down from where she was. She slid again, farther this time, caught herself, then started moving again. I was yelling at her to stop; they were gone; she couldn't get down that way, whatever I could get out while running and gasping for breath.

She kept glancing up at the ledge, and coming down the side of the butte. I was no more than a hundred feet away when she reached the last rimrock, eight or ten feet high, and she started to lower herself over the rim. She clung to her backpack, tried to hold onto the edge of the rimrock with one hand, and then she dropped.

She was unconscious when I reached her and nearly fell at her side. I gasped for air, and felt for her pulse, and then loosened her grip on the backpack and eased it out of the way in order to try to determine if she had a broken back, a broken neck, or anything else that shouldn't be moved.

"Maria, can you hear me? Can you move?"

She groaned but didn't move, and then I heard a man's voice very close. I hadn't heard him approach. He called out, "How bad is she?"

I turned to see a cowboy dismounting from a horse; I hadn't heard the

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horse either. He tossed a rope around a boulder and came to kneel at Maria's side. He was the same man I had seen shooting at the sky.

"I don't know," I said. "Alive."

He didn't shove me aside, but he displaced me, and seemed professional and expert as he ran his hands over Maria's body, looked into her eyes, and even pinched her. She jerked away from him, and he drew back, satisfied.

"That your rig over there?" he asked, motioning toward Betsy. I nodded. "Fine. Let's carry her to it and see to her wounds. You have some water, bandages, first aid stuff?"

She was dazed but conscious when together we carried her to Betsy, where I lowered the bed and we laid her on it. I pulled a first aid kit out from a cabinet, and the cowboy began to search through it. She was trying to sit up, struggling weakly by then.

"Hush now, Miss," the cowboy said. "You're safe now. I'll just see to some of those cuts."

"No!" she cried. "I have to go. My pack! Where's my pack? Please, where's my pack?"

Where I had left it, I thought, back at the foot of the butte. "I'll get it," I said. "You just take it easy. I won't be long." I looked at the cowboy. "Mr...."

"Maddox," he said. "Bert Maddox."

Maria made a choking sound. "Maddox! You're Maddox!"

If she knew more than his name, it was more than I knew. "Okay, Mr. Maddox. If you can see to her, I'll go get her pack before it gets dark."

"And my horse," he said. "You can ride her back if you want." His eyes were twinkling as if he was aware of how little I knew about horses, how helpless I would be trying to handle one. "Or just hold the lead rope and walk," he said. "She'll follow like a puppy dog."

By the time I reached the butte, I was so tired I wanted to sit there the rest of the night. I had gone through a triathlon; climbed a mountain, run a marathon, done the weight-lifting, all that was missing was the swim, and I was so wrung out that if I were alone in a bathtub I might sink beneath the water and drown. I heaved up the backpack and cursed. That woman had never learned a thing about packing light. I took the lead rope from the rock that Maddox had tossed it around, and started to walk. The

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horse didn't move, and I cursed again, this time at a target, and then it did move. I wanted to kick the brute but I was afraid it would kick back. It seemed to understand curses just fine.

When I reentered the bus, Maria was sitting up on the bed, leaning against the pillow. Maddox was tying her bootlace. One of her pants legs was rolled to her knee, and a bandage covered her leg from knee to ankle.

"Just telling Maria what we should do is have you drive us up to the house, let me load her on the helicopter and get her to a real doctor. That leg needs stitches."

I eyed him suspiciously. "You just happen to have a handy helicopter?"

"Matter of fact, I do," he said solemnly. His eyes were twinkling again. He unrolled the pants leg back over the bandage and got to his feet, a tall, lean man with gray hair, about sixty, with a weather-seamed face and laughing eyes.

Maria's gaze was riveted on the backpack. She had not acknowledged me in any way, and seemed to have forgotten that I was the one who had fed her an apple and chocolate. Her face was still dirty, tear-streaked now, and very pale. She began to ease herself to the edge of the bed, then put her good foot down firmly on the floor, and pushed herself upright, keeping her weight on the good leg. Her lips tightened, but she did not make a sound.

"Is there a...a toilet?" she asked.

I pointed toward the rear of the bus. Toilet, small basin, shower, all back there. For a long time I had had just a shower curtain, but Jeanne had not liked that and I had added a real door, a plastic door. Shut the lid of the toilet, and the tiny space became a shower room.

Dragging the pack with one hand, holding onto the bed, and then the wall with the other, Maria hobbled to the toilet and closed the door after her. I went to the refrigerator and got out two beers, handed one to Maddox, popped the other one open and drank thirstily. She probably had her stash of painkillers in the backpack, I thought, and she would come waltzing out fresh as a daisy.

"You a photographer?" Maddox asked, looking around at my equipment. The video camera was on the floor next to the driver's seat, ready to go, but not today. "Video and everything," he added.

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"Yep. I was going to tape the shadow swallowing the ghost town."

"Be there tomorrow, same as always," he said. "I don't believe I caught your name."

I didn't throw it, I thought irritably, but I said, "Jackson Betz."

"And she's with you?" he asked, nodding toward the shower room.

"Never saw her before today. Maria's all I know."

"Ah," he said, as if that explained everything. "She needs a doctor. Bad gash on her leg, needs stitches."

"You hold her down; I'll drive." He didn't smile, and I wasn't smiling either. I realized we were both listening, and not a sound had come from the shower room. Not a rustle, no running water, nothing.

"She might have passed out," I said after another minute of silence.

He nodded, finished his beer and set the can down, then stepped toward the plastic door. "I'll go," he said.

Only one of us would fit in the narrow space and he was closer to the door. I watched him go to it and tap, tap again louder, then open it. I couldn't see past his body, but when he turned toward me, he was tight-lipped and frozen-looking.

I pushed past him and looked inside. The shower room was empty.

WE SEARCHED. Knowing it was futile, knowing she could not have left that tiny space any way except by the door, and then passing both of us, knowing we had to go through the motions, we searched until it grew dark. He knew Ghost Town the way he knew his own kitchen, he said, played in there as a kid, had explored every inch of it, and that night we searched every inch of it. He could read trails, and there was none left by her. Then, sitting on camp chairs outside Betsy we drank all my beer; he went to his saddle bag and brought back a flask of rum, and we drank all of that. And we talked.

After I had told him what little there was to know about me, about Jeanne, about the three times I had seen Maria, he talked about himself. Two grown sons, one a millionaire in computers, the other one in prison. Drugs. Frannie divorced him after Tod got busted, he said. She lived in Seattle close to their millionaire son and hadn't set foot on the ranch in ten years.

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"It's a crisis that tests you," he said meditatively. "Any two idiots can hang together through good times, but comes a crisis, that's the test. We failed."

We were both silent for a while. Then I asked, "Didn't Maria say anything at all about herself while you were patching her up?" We had talked about everything but her.

"Not much. Said she's a geologist and got me talking about the land around here."

I made a noise, something between a snort and a bitter laugh. "She told me she's an amateur botanist."

"Ah," he said.

"Those men who were after her," I said. "Did you see them enough to know them?"

"Yep. Mallory brothers, poachers. They slaughter elk and take the horns, just the horns."

"You going to call the sheriff, nab them for assault?"

"Without anyone to press charges? What's the use?"

Yeah, I thought. What's the use?

"You going to talk about what happened out here?" Maddox asked then.

"I don't know. Are you?"

"Nope. What's the use? Two drunks seeing ghosts. And I don't even believe in ghosts. Or never used to anyway."

"Right," I said. "But if you don't believe in ghosts, what's left? How did she get out of the bus?"

"Don't know. Maybe we shared a hallucination, something like that. Maybe she never did exist, except in our heads. Two lonely men, drinking buddies, sharing a hallucination. I'm going home now and get drunk. Want to come with me?"

I didn't. I watched him get on his horse, and watched them disappear up the track to the ranch road; then I continued to sit under the stars. The sky looked too full, heavy, as if it might not be able to bear so much weight. I should have eaten something hours ago, I thought at one point, but I didn't want to eat anything, didn't want to move, and especially I didn't want to think. I watched the stars and waited for the sky to fall. When I began to shake, or the ground did, or the world did I got up and went inside Betsy, closed and locked the door, and fell into bed.

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I hung around the next day, now and then scanned the ledge on the butte, packed up, tied down things, stashed things away, getting ready to pull out; I read a book, but mostly I just sat still and tried not to think about anything. Late in the afternoon Maddox showed up, driving a Jeep this time. For several moments he stood gazing at the butte without speaking.

Finally he turned toward me. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You aiming to videotape that shadow?"

"Yes. That's what I'm waiting for, and then I'll take off."

"Best place to watch from is where you saw me yesterday, up on that rocky place. I go there now and again to watch."

He offered to lead me to his favorite spot; we could drive to within twenty feet or so, and he offered me supper. "Leave your rig on the rise over there and come home with me in the Jeep," he said. "I'll get you back in plenty of time."

I took him up on it, and very quickly realized that he wasn't just a cowboy. His ranch house was a sprawling place with people around to fetch and carry; they all treated him with affectionate deference. Sarah, his cook, mock-scolded him for bringing home company without warning. Approaching the house I had glimpsed not only a helicopter, but a small plane as well. King of the cowboys.

Dinner was wonderful, the first home cooking since...ever. My mother was not much of a cook. Maddox talked about the surrounding country, the people, everything except what was on both our minds. I would spend the night, he said matter-of-factly, and in the morning he'd point me out the way they all came and went, cut two hours off my trip. No one used that back ranch road. By eight we were ready to take his Jeep back to the rocky place where I had left Betsy and my gear.

Neither of us talked as I got set up, and the sun crept through the cloudless sky toward the butte. Dead Mule Butte, he had called it. I got some good B-roll footage, Ghost Town, the area around it, the butte, and then we waited for the sun to duck behind the top. If I were really artistic, I thought, I would have set up a giant fan to swirl the dust, swing a sign or something that would creak and groan.... The air was dead calm.

Then the butte started swallowing the sun. Maddox had been absolutely right about this being the place to watch the show, I thought, as the

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shadow began to creep across the space from the foot of the butte to the town. It was like a Roman phalanx, a solid iron curtain, a giant maw.... The brilliance of sunlight on wood, platinum gleaming, then lost to shadows, the glint of mineral-laden rocks, lost in shadows, dust as white as talc, lost in shadows....

When it was over, I took a deep breath; it appeared that the whole town had vanished. A trick of contrasting lights, I knew, but my brain could only interpret what my eyes registered, and that was the message: the shadow of the butte had consumed Ghost Town.

Maddox's voice made me start; I had forgotten he was there. He was leaning against a boulder several feet away from me, his gaze on the town below us. "When I was a boy," he said, "eight, nine, about that, I had a nightmare about the town. The shadow was a river of blood flowing over it, burying it. I didn't come anywhere near here for years after that."

I followed his Jeep back to the ranch, made sure everything was in good shape for an early departure the following morning, and then we talked for a short time. He was tired, he said, and he suspected that I was just as tired. If I hadn't slept any better than he had the previous night, he was sure I was beat. I was.

"She, Maria, said she'd read my book," he said in his study. The room, furnished with good, old leather-covered chairs, a fine antique desk piled with papers, also was crammed with books on shelves, on tables, on chairs. He went to a shelf and pulled off a slender volume with a red cover. He handed it to me. "Don't see how she got her hands on it," he said. "I had to tie down my own family and make them read it and far's I know they're the only ones who ever left eye tracks on the pages." He looked around the room moodily. "She said she read it, that it changed her life."

I flipped through it quickly, self-published with awful photographs poorly reproduced; when I started to hand it back, he waved it away. "Keep it," he said. "A memento of a memorable few days. Come on. I'll show you where you sleep."

The next morning I was out of there soon after dawn, and two days later back in Tinseltown.

The rest of the summer I was busy; Mort complained piteously, but paid me, and I spent time and all my cash getting Betsy fixed up. Then a

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couple of good jobs came along that kept me in beer and beans. I didn't touch any of the last set of photographs from Ghost Town, didn't look at any of the video. Tried hard not to think about those few days, about Maria and Bert Maddox, and the shadow. Tried to make myself stop staring at every slender black-haired woman I saw.

In mid-October I woke up shaking one night; L.A. was having one of its seizures, not bad, enough to shake things up. But in my mind I had come awake under the star-laden sky, shaking, filled with dread, or disbelief, or something I couldn't even name, and it was all back in my head as if I had not pushed it out repeatedly.

The shaking had already stopped when I got out of bed, and, cursing under my breath, pulled open the drawer that held the film canister from Ghost Town. "All right," I snarled.

Two days later I was enlarging a dozen of the photographs, right to the point when graininess defeats the purpose. Pictures of her, emerging from a shadow the first time I saw her, dirty, limping, then waving at Ghost Town, waving good-bye to something. I didn't have pictures of our next encounter, when she showed up while my back was turned, but my memory of that meeting was as sharp as any photograph could ever be. Dirty, hurt, a mess, clutching that pack as if it held her life savings. The way she had eaten the apple, and then the candy bar.... The last set, the final time she had appeared on the ledge, neat as a girl scout ready for inspection. Several shots of her going about whatever it was she was going about, right up until the poachers with rifles drove her off the ledge.

They probably hadn't intended anything like that, I was thinking distantly, focusing on her face, her legs; they probably just intended to have a little fun with an unescorted female.... I looked closer, a stain or something on the leg of her khaki pants, not the hurt leg, the good one. I went back to the first pictures, and there it was. A darker patch that looked like a stain, berries or something. It was hard to find when everything about her was a mess, with a lot of smudges on her clothes, some rips, the ragged shirt tail. But it was there in the picture of her when she was filthy and hurt, and in the picture of her when she was fresh and clean. I took three negatives back to the enlarger and did some more work on them. Finally I rearranged the photographs, changed the sequence, and I sat for

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a long time staring at them, my mind blank, not wanting to deal with this at all.

Then I called Bert Maddox.

I flew up to Portland, and read his book on the way. Not badly written, and occasionally his enthusiasm came through, but for the most part it was dry, with rough spots that any good editor could have fixed. The photographs should have been deep sixed in the darkroom. He was an amateur geologist and loved the land around him and its history, human and geologic. But the book he had written was not enough to have changed anyone's life.

He met me at the airport, and he chuckled at my reluctance to climb into his little four-seater. I was more afraid of it than of his horse, but he was a good pilot and he avoided the High Cascades and instead followed the Columbia River east of the mountains and then headed south. Snowing in the mountains, he said, turbulent air. I was grateful. I had heard that every small private plane in the west met a mountain head on sooner or later.

He didn't ask a single question until we had left the plane to be rubbed down or something, and were in his study.

"What have you found?" he demanded then.

"Can we clear off a little desk space? I'll show you some of the photographs I took."

He put a stack of papers on the floor, moved a few things, and I began to spread out the photographs. "You arrange them," I said.

He studied them briefly, then put the morning pictures down, followed by the ones I had taken late in the day. "That's a no-brainer," he said.

"Look at her clothes, Bert." I pointed. "Look at that stain on her pant leg, look at the dirt on her cheek and forehead.

He looked, and began to frown. Then he pointed at her boot. "What's that?"

"Blood, from that nasty gash on her leg. It got on her boot. It's not on the late afternoon photograph. But that stain is on every single one."

"But that's — " He sat down behind the desk, staring at the photographs.

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"Impossible? Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Here she shows up, neat and clean, not injured. But there's that stain on her pants leg. She has a job to do and sets about it. The goons with guns turn up and she is panicked and tries to get away, over the ledge. You fix her up, and she goes into the john and vanishes." I sat down too then. "But she hasn't finished whatever it is she has to do. She has to come back, and this time I interrupt her. She's filthy, hurt, limping a lot, in pain. The poachers start shooting, and I go to the ledge to see if they're shooting up my stuff. When I turn around, she's gone. I searched, Bert. I really looked. She was in no shape to be hiking in the woods, not with crazies shooting guns. But I didn't find a trace. Nothing." I wished I had pictures to go with that scene. I pointed to the morning pictures. "Here, the first time I saw her, fairly early in the morning. She's hurt, blood on her boot, limping, her clothes a mess, and this time she does whatever it is she has to do. And she waves good-bye before she disappears."

"That's backwards," he said harshly.

"In our time frame. But in hers? I don't think so."

THE NEXT MORNING we hiked up the butte, not the way I had gone up before, but on a trail from the north side. It was much easier than my way had been. At the ledge he waved me back and began to examine the pocket of dirt, starting at the farthest end, inching his way along it, feeling the ground as he went. I had pointed out where I had seen loose dirt, but after a glance at it, he had shrugged and started searching his way.

"Here it is," he said after several minutes. He was squatting several feet away from where I would have looked. "She had dirt left over and put it there," he said. He sifted dirt through his fingers, and down a couple of inches he stopped. "Something." Carefully, using a rock for a tool, he dug out a circle; centered in it was a flat black object about two inches in diameter. He dug some more, felt around the object, and finally he pulled it up and out. It looked like a ten-inch long heavy-duty black nail, a spike with a flat head. The shank was no thicker than half an inch through.

He studied it closely, then handed it to me. There was nothing to be seen about the object; it still looked like a long nail. No markings, no

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buttons to push, nothing. The top part didn't feel like metal, a dense plastic maybe. A probe of some sort? A sensor? Thermometer?

We studied it, cursed it, studied it some more, like cavemen trying to figure out a digital camera. Then we sat under a pine tree and brooded, with more silence between us than conversation.

"She'll come back to fix it," I said finally. "It has to do something they can see, measure, calibrate, something, and it's been moved; she'll come back."

The nail, on a log between us, was not doing a damn thing.

"Maybe."

"And when she does I intend to nail her down, maybe with her own nail, and make her give us some answers."

"Ah," he said. "A stakeout. How long you intend to keep watch?"

"As long as it takes."

"Uh huh. We'll need a camp, no fire, of course, some warm clothes, food.... I'll have a look see." He got up and went into the woods.

He didn't question a stakeout and his part in it any more than I did. We had seen the impossible, and now believed the incredible, and we both wanted answers. That was the start of one of the most miserable days of my life. I took pictures. I doodled, read a book, ate the food he provided after a trip back to the ranch house. We took turns sleeping that night, and the ground shook. Twice. Not any worse than it was down in L.A., but ground shouldn't shake, that was my conviction. *Terra firma*, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy....

We had rigged a signal, a line from the lookout spot back to the makeshift camp, which was some distance away since the woods were so sparse, and we wanted to be out of her sight when she appeared. If she appeared. I was in camp pretending to read, brooding about the futility of this whole bit of nonsense when the line moved, then moved again.

I rushed to the northern end of the ledge, then kept behind a tree and watched and listened as Maddox spoke to Maria. She had put her backpack down near the spot where he had dug up the gadget, and was facing him, away from me. What we were most afraid of was that she might get spooked again and go down the face of the butte the way she had done before.

"So I figured the only way to get it off my mind was to come up here

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and see if I could find out what you were up to," he was saying, leaning against a tree, at ease. He held up the nail. "Guess this is what you're looking for."

She raised her hand holding an identical object. "I thought an animal might have dug it up," she said. She took a step or two toward him.

"Ah. Then you don't need this one," he said. He eyed it and took a step toward the edge of the basalt as if he might toss it over the side.

She took another step, another, her hand outstretched. "Please," she said. "Don't.... That's a valuable piece of equipment." She took another step when he didn't move.

I jumped out from behind the tree, ran to her pack and grabbed it as she swung around.

"Stop! Give it back!" she cried, as I moved farther away, out of reach.

Just what I had thought, she hadn't been afraid for herself, but for the pack which she had held onto all the way down the cliff before. Her gaze was fixed on it now.

"What I'm going to do," I said, "is take this back to our camp. Come with us, or else I'll just open it and spread out everything in it and we'll try to figure it out ourselves."

She made a sound deep back in her throat, a groan, a suppressed sob, something, and she shook her head violently. "Don't try to open it! You don't know what you're doing! I have to replace the — this," she said desperately, holding up the nail thing.

"After we have a little talk," I said. I started to walk away with her pack, and exactly as if she were on a lead rope, she followed. Maddox came after us.

In camp we sat on logs and Maddox poured coffee from a thermos and handed out cups. She sipped hers with the same intent expression she had shown when she ate the apple and the candy bar.

"I want to see what's in that pack," I said harshly.

"Hold on," Maddox said. "Let me have a say first. Maria, you really are a geologist, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"And you're monitoring this butte for something you know is going to happen, aren't you?" He didn't wait for a response. "Way I see it, we've been having more and more tremors around here, enough to spook the

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animals away. I tried to get someone interested in looking into it, but all the available equipment is tied up in the Cascades, Mount Hood, Jefferson, even Rainier. None left over for a remote place like this, practically uninhabited. Let the earthquake come, that's their attitude, and after the fact, they'll come around and measure the displacement. But I figure it must be something bigger than just an earthquake, or you wouldn't be interested. How'm I doing?"

She was watching him with rapt attention. "Very well," she whispered. "You know about Paricutin? Like that."

"Here? Good God! When?"

"November sixth, three forty-eight A.M."

"How widespread, how high?"

"Altitude, 425 meters in the first month, eventually nearly five thousand meters. Area of lava flow, fifty-two square kilometers."

"Jesus Christ!" Maddox said. He stood up, then sat down again heavily. He picked up a nail and looked at it. "This is something like a GPS receiver?"

"Something like it," she said. Then very quietly she said, "Maddox, I have to replace it and go. My time is limited. This is an opportunity we have been waiting for for many years. We know what happens after it starts — there are excellent accounts — but if we can get real data on the beginning, which we have been doing, it will prove immeasurably valuable. I have to finish my work here."

He nodded.

"Just one goddam minute!" I yelled then. I felt as if I had wandered into an advanced class in Japanese or something. "What's in that pack that's so precious? If you can time travel why not send a crew to watch the fireworks or whatever you say is going to happen here? Why send a single woman to do a job like this?"

"One reason I was chosen is because I'm qualified," she said. "And we can't afford to send crews, or even single individuals for more than a very limited time. It's hideously expensive, and our project is not a very high priority, I'm afraid. Few pure research projects are. We place sensors and monitor them from a satellite periodically. That too is prohibitively expensive. And the pack.... If anyone tampers with it, it will self-destruct." She stood up and pulled out her shirt tail, lifted the shirt a few

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inches. She was wearing a wide black belt that looked like a spandex girdle. "I am linked to the pack," she said. "That is one of the conditions we must accept." She turned to Maddox and held out her hand. "Please, may I have that now?"

Frustrated I watched him hand it over, then pick up her pack. "You can whiz through time and tell us about it? Not conditioned to keep your mouth shut, anything like that? Why haven't we heard from others that it's happening?"

She smiled slightly. "It's possible that you have heard and refused to believe. Just as no one will believe you if you tell about this meeting. My time is running out. Can we go back now?"

We returned to the ledge where I watched her place the nail on the ground, point down. It seemed to move of its own accord until it was below the surface of the surrounding dirt, which she brushed over it and then tamped down with her foot. When she stood up, I snapped her picture. She smiled at me and I snapped another one. It was a strange smile that I couldn't read at all, gentle and knowing.

She strapped on her pack and put one hand on the belt under her shirt, then she said to Maddox, "The effusive activity on the east slope will start at one-ten on the afternoon of the second day. I'm very happy to have met you. And, Jackson, you are exactly what I thought you would be. Goodbye." And she was gone. No fading out, no slow dissolve; there, then gone.

"My God!" Maddox said hoarsely. "Three weeks!"

WE WERE BUSY during those three weeks. I had a crash course in vulcanism, the use of the GPS equipment, a Global Positioning System; Maria's people were measuring how much the land swelled as the magma began to rise, he explained. I learned about Paricutin, a Mexican volcano, created in 1942; about Jorulla, another Mexican volcano, one that had erupted where no volcano had been before two hundred years earlier.

Maddox made half a dozen maps of possible scenarios, where the ash would land, where the lava would flow. He tried to warn his neighbors, who scoffed; the university researchers were kind and disbelieving. The Strawberry Volcanics had been quiet for ten million years; an earthquake of some magnitude might occur, of course, and they talked about the

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various fault lines in Oregon, but no volcano, not there anyway. Mount Hood perhaps.... Neither of us mentioned Maria, then or later. What was the use? Maddox hired extra hands and had an out-of-season roundup, moved his livestock west, out of harm's way, and he moved his household west, packed up everything he didn't want to lose, all machinery, tractors, cars, trucks, the aircraft, moved it all west to a place near Redmond. One of his scenarios had his entire ranch covered with many feet of ash. I went to Portland and bought the best video camera available, on his credit card, and boxes of film and case lots of digital tape.

While others were carrying out his instructions in bewilderment and fear, with distrust of me so visible I was afraid someone might take a notion to pop me and end this silliness, every day we got into the helicopter and flew around the countryside in order for me to get used to the motion of the machine, learn all over again how to use a video camera. He flew us through clouds, fog, rain, turbulence, because, he said, that was what we were going to encounter. Strangely, after the first few minutes, I forgot to be afraid. From the air and from the ground I recorded hours of videotape, and a thousand or more still shots of locations he pointed me to.

He planned to write the best book the world had ever seen on the rebirth of a volcano, and this time he would have superb illustrations of everything before, during, and after the eruptions. He was as excited as a child on Christmas Eve, and so was I.

That night, he regarded a newspaper account of his delusion, his premonition, written very much tongue in cheek. "If it happens," he said, "that's going to be in the foreword. If it doesn't, I'll frame it and hang it on the wall to remind me of what a jackass I was. Ready?"

We flew to the ranch house at two-thirty in the morning, drank coffee and ate sandwiches, and listened to the echoes of our voices in the stripped building. Outside it was eerily quiet; the animals and birds had fled.

At three-forty-five we took off under an ink-black sky with a dense cloud cover at twenty thousand feet, and nothing to reflect light anywhere. And at three-forty-eight there was a rumble, like a freight train coming straight at us, followed by an explosion that shook the helicopter violently. A streak of fire flashed straight up, then more and more flames

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shot with cannonball speed straight up into the black sky, into the clouds that turned red and glowed, pulsing. More explosions, a massive shower of sparks and fireballs, more explosions. Now the clouds cast a weird red light on the Earth and there was lightning everywhere, horizontal, vertical, forking, blue and white lightning that hurt my eyes with its brilliance. A plume of glowing ash, illuminated from within by its own heat, raced eastward, growing, swelling. The noise was continuous, deafening: explosions, the cracking and hissing of lightning, non-stop thunder, the howl of storm winds that buffeted the helicopter, sent it plunging one moment, releasing it to shoot upward the next, side to side, up, down.... The screams of two maniacs whooping insanely, unable not to.

The second time we went in to refuel, the sky was getting crowded with aircraft, and ground observers were starting to choke the highways. Too late, I exulted. Too goddam late!

Some time that day we must have eaten, must have slept, but I had no memory of either. The helicopter was pitted, with blistered paint; my face was red, like a bad sunburn, and that didn't matter either.

At one o'clock on the second day we flew over the ranch; the house and outbuildings had vanished under ash; the chopper made dust devils and mini-tornadoes of the talc-like ash, and we didn't linger. We flew to a place where we could see into Ghost Town. He couldn't land the helicopter down there, but he hovered. Miraculously the town was untouched. The violent eruptions were no longer continuous, and I thought briefly that the town might escape unscathed. I was taping it when Maddox's voice came through the headphone.

"Look."

Dead Mule Butte had been thirteen hundred feet high, and in the last thirty-six hours it had grown to twenty-eight hundred feet. Although lava had been pouring out the northern slopes of the volcano, it had not started here. Now, high up on the side a vertical red line had appeared. A landslide started, hurling chunks of lava down the mountain, and the red line grew, widened, became a channel, a stream, a river. It flowed downward in an erratic path, around boulders, straight down, around obstructions, then down again.

He held the copter as steady as he could and I taped the flow. We didn't speak. The river of molten rock was forty or fifty feet wide, and growing

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wider. And then it plunged over the side and moved toward Ghost Town. A red wall, relentless in its flow. The first building erupted into flames, then another, and with a great whooshing noise the entire town burst into flame. The wall of lava swallowed the burning buildings, consumed the town, and filled the valley.

"Earth's blood," Maddox whispered, his voice hollow in my ear.

He called his book *Earth's Blood*, and it became an international bestseller; of course he had a collaborator, me, a very good editor, and magnificent photographs. My video was seen by just about everyone on Earth; aired repeatedly, it was unavoidable. Maddox named the new mountain Mount Maria. They wanted to call it Mount Maddox, but he stuck to his guns, and they had to give in. Mount Maria rose to eight thousand two hundred feet in the first year, and was still growing. It had another seven thousand feet to go.

Maddox was like a kid, rejuvenated. Oregon would never be the same; growing a three-mile high new mountain was a real happening. And I was free to roam, to wander, to do exactly what I wanted, when and how I wanted. They no longer called it laziness or a lack of ambition; now it was artistic freedom.

Jeanne phoned to say she really missed me and maybe we could get back together, but I knew she had hit a stretch of bad luck and an angry wife or two. I took her and Mort to lunch and slipped away while they were talking about a new picture. This drop-dead-gorgeous chick is in a shipwreck and washes ashore in a remote fishing village in Mexico where weird things start to happen....

As I was walking away from the restaurant I moved aside for a tour group. A young woman, the guide, was explaining that this was where many of the stars had lunch. I stopped moving, maybe stopped breathing, and stared, and that caught her attention. She looked annoyed. I felt the butterflies, an adrenaline rush, a mild heart attack, all the above.

"Miss, would it be all right if I snapped a picture or two?" I asked hoarsely.

She looked at her group apologetically. They appeared enthralled; she was being "discovered" right before their eyes! She shrugged, and I took

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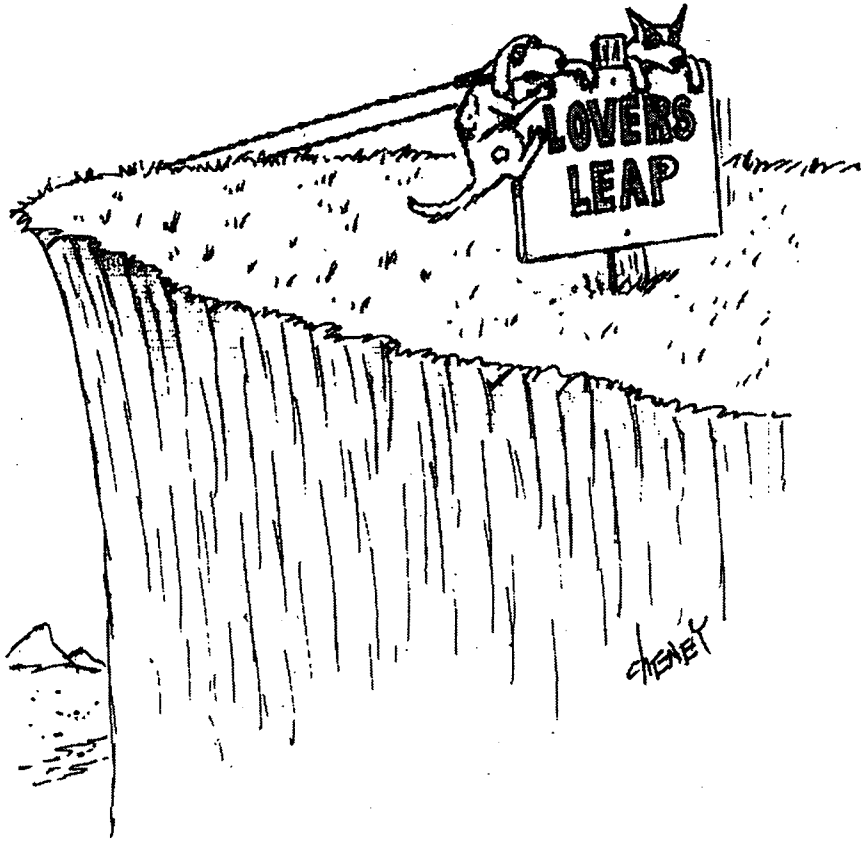
her picture, three pictures. In one she had started to smile. They moved on; I watched until she was out of sight.

That night I sat comparing her face to Maria's in the last pictures I had taken of her: black hair, bright blue eyes, same bones, same eyebrows. There were differences, only to be expected between generations, but I knew. The tour guide had an ID tag with the company name, and hers. Rita. I touched the curving lips. "Tomorrow," I said.

I leaned back and regarded Betsy fondly. She had been good to me, good for me, but maybe it was time to get a real house. In addition to Betsy, I added quickly. Before I put the pictures away I studied Maria's face again, her knowing, Mona-Lisa smile, and I smiled back.



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A New Yorker for most of his life, Robert Sheckley lives in Oregon these days. His recent novels include Godshome *and a Babylon 5 novel entitled* A Call to Arms, *but in the past year he has been focusing mostly on shorter works. This new story marks his third appearance in our pages in the past four months alone and we expect to bring you more in the future.*

Mr. Sheckley's c.v. indicates that he has held jobs as a pretzel salesman and a tie-painter, and odds are good that he too worked at a department store once. But that's not to suggest that this delightful fantasy is in any way autobiographical...

Magic, Maples, and Maryanne

By Robert Sheckley

A FEW YEARS AGO I WAS working at Sullivan's department store in Manhattan. In the evenings, I returned to my one room apartment on New York's Lower East Side and practiced magic.

Magic exists. But once you write down your methods, magic stops working. And once you start asking for specific things, instead of taking what magic is willing to give, you are letting yourself in for trouble. I kept my secrets to myself.

It is not a utilitarian thing, this matter of magic. Once you enter it, you move into realms where things happen in accord with a logic that becomes clear only in retrospect. The elusiveness, the contrariness of magic explains what happened to those magicians of old who produced gold and counted kings among their patrons, rose to power and influence, only to be proven frauds and mountebanks and have everything taken away from them.

But the best of them weren't frauds. They had compromised their powers by revealing them to kings and learned men, and by asking for

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wealth for themselves. They had brought the inscrutable wrath of magic down on their heads.

I had a sense of the purity of the matter, but I wasn't completely convinced of it. That's how I got the Donna Karan jackets.

My job at Sullivan's was to take the old stuff off the racks and display dummies and put out the new stuff. My researches in magic were going well for me at that time. I had discovered the principle of the *temenos;* the importance of creating a sacred space. I learned for myself the words and combinations of words, sounds, and gestures that seemed to hold magical possibilities. And sometimes, things appeared overnight in my *temenos,* my sacred space.

Once, magic gave me a small elephant carved in mellow old ivory. I was able to sell it to a curio shop for two hundred dollars, even without being able to say where it came from. The productions of magic provide no provenance. But mainly, my investigations didn't bring me anything tangible.

I wondered if I could specify something and ask magic to make me a copy of it, or bring me another one like it. That didn't seem too much to ask.

Working alone late one night, I set up a portion of the stock room as a sacred space. I drew the magical lines. I put in a Donna Karan jacket for the spirit to look over.

Early next morning, I was gratified to find four copies of this jacket. That, plus the original, made five. I never knew which was the original. They were all identical, even down to the tiny flaw in an inner seam.

I didn't know at the time that magic had plans for me. I didn't know I was being watched by no less a person than Phil, the floor manager.

Phil walked in while I was putting away the extra jackets in my backpack. "What have we here?" he asked.

"These four jackets are mine," I told him.

He smiled his superior smile. "Don't happen to have a sales slip, do you?"

"You don't understand," I said. "These jackets don't belong to the store. I made them."

Phil looked at the jackets more closely. "I know this model. It's what we have in the display space."

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"That's the original," I said. "These others are my copies."

Phil looked them over, frowned, and said, "Well, let's go to my office and straighten this out."

Phil had an office on the mezzanine above Sullivan's main floor. After checking the floor model, he went to his computer and called up the item number. He was surprised to find it was one of a kind.

"That must be wrong," he said. "We must have ordered five of these."

But a phone call to our distributor told him he had indeed ordered only one. The other four could not be accounted for.

"I really don't understand," Phil said.

"It's my fault," I said.

"You? How could that be?"

"I did it," I told him. "I'm sorry about this, sir. I don't want to cause any trouble. I need this job. Look, you can have the jackets. I promise I won't do it again."

"Let me try to follow your reasoning. How did you do it?"

"I just did it," I said, still not wanting to tell him about the magic.

"But what did you do, specifically? You must have done something. These jackets didn't just fall out of the air."

"As a matter of fact, that's exactly what happened. Or so I believe. I didn't see it myself. We're not supposed to."

"We?

"Magicians, sir." I knew I'd have to come out with it sooner or later.

Phil looked at me, his eyes narrowed, brows wrinkled. "Explain."

"I do magic," I told him.

"I see," Phil said.

"I do it in a *temenos*, a sacred space," I babbled, as if that would make it all clear.

Phil stared at me and frowned and looked like he was going to fire me on the spot. Then his face took on a thoughtful look, and he stared at the jackets for a while. At last he said, "Can you make something appear here on the table in front of me?"

"Oh, no! Magic doesn't work in the open. It doesn't like anyone watching. It's not like science, you know. It's magic, it loves to hide."

"So what do you do if you want to get something?"

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"I do the magic, in the *temenos*. But usually I don't wish for anything specific. I don't think magic likes that."

"Okay, sure, whatever. But when you do this magic of yours, something always turns up in your sacred space?"

"Not every time. But surprisingly often."

Phil stared at me for a long time. Finally he said, "This is crazy, you know."

"I know," I said.

"But I'm interested. I'd like you to demonstrate for me."

"I could do that," I said, "but not here in the store. I don't think magic liked me doing that. But in my own apartment...."

"Sure. I don't care where you do it. I just want to see it."

We met two nights later. Phil was good enough not to sneer outright at my small, cramped slummy apartment. But I knew what he was thinking: *this guy can do magic? I must be crazy to be here.*

Still, here he was. He had brought something for me to duplicate. A very small gold coin. Phil said it wasn't worth much — just twenty dollars.

"It's not a good idea to ask magic for any particular thing," I said.

"Then how do we know it works?" he said.

I couldn't answer that.

"I'll want it back," he said, handing me the coin. "Hopefully, with a couple of others like it."

"You'll probably get it back. As for getting more, we'll have to see what magic decides."

I put the coin in the sacred space I had created in my closet. I asked Phil to stay in the front room while I did the formulas and gestures. I don't like people to see me doing magic. I think it works against the success of the enterprise.

Phil sat down on the bed while I went into the closet and closed the door. In magic, moments are not all alike. You have to guess which kind of Power you're working with, and what its mood is. I did what I thought would work for that particular moment.

When I came out, Phil asked, "So what happens now?"

"Tomorrow night at this same time," I said, "I open the door to the *temenos*."

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"You mean the closet?"

"For now, it's a *temenos*."

"Couldn't we take a peek now? Maybe whatever it's sending is there already."

I shook my head. "I won't open that door until tomorrow evening. Impatience is very bad form when you're dealing with magic. You can't rush the Powers. Twenty-four hours is a minimum time. A couple of days would be better."

Phil looked like he had a few things to say about that, but finally he shrugged and said, "See you here tomorrow," and left.

NEXT EVENING, AFTER Phil arrived, I opened the closet door, and there were seven gold coins in the *temenos*. They all looked the same.

I handed them to Phil. "I think this is what the Power or the spirits or magic or whatever wanted you to have."

"I thought you said the spirits don't like to be asked for anything specific."

"The spirits are unpredictable," I said.

Phil jingled the coins in his hands. Then he held out one to me. "You might as well get something out of this."

"No thanks," I said.

"Suit yourself." Phil put the coins in his pocket. He was thinking hard. Finally he said, "Might you be open to a business proposition?"

"I'd have to hear it first."

"I'll get back to you," Phil said, and left.

About a week later, Phil asked me to meet him and a couple of friends at an expensive restaurant not far from Sullivan's. He indicated that they had talked the previous night and had a proposition to put to me.

I could imagine how his meeting with his friends had gone. I could hear Phil saying, "I don't want you fellows to laugh at me, but I know we're all interested in far-out investments."

"Sure," Jon said. "What have you got?"

"I've got a guy who does magic, or some damned thing."

And he would have explained what happened. He would have said,

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"Hey, I don't know what he's doing, but it looks good enough to invest a few bucks in."

So we sat in the restaurant in a comfortable haze of smoke and beer smell and dim golden lights and hurrying waitresses with twinkling legs, and we had drinks and they all stared at me.

Finally, one of them, a fat, complacent-looking guy named Haynes, said to me, "so what exactly do you do in this magical closet of yours?"

"It's not the closet that's magical, it's the *temenos*, the sacred space I create within it."

"And what do you do with this sacred place?"

"I perform certain procedures."

"Such as?"

"I can't tell you. Telling destroys the magic."

"Convenient, if you want to keep your secret."

I shook my head. "Necessary, strictly necessary."

I didn't tell him how I had deduced that magicians in the past like Cagliostro and the Comte de St.-Germain had grown rich and famous, but finally their powers had deserted them and they ended badly. I think their downfall came from telling, and from demanding too much.

They held a whispered consultation. Then Jon, a tall, thin, balding guy in a three-piece business suit, said to me, "Okay, we're interested."

"It's a far-out kind of thing," I told him.

"We're not scared of far-out investments," Phil said. "We've got a share in a shaman's school in Arizona. Is that far enough out for you?"

"How could you invest in me?" I asked.

"Oh, we weren't thinking of anything fancy. But we could set you up with a place to practice your magic. A place where you wouldn't be disturbed. We'd supply your food and pocket money. You could give up that lousy day job at Sullivan's. You could live on your magic."

I said, "Looks like there's a lot you could do for me. But what could I do for you?"

"Split the take with us fifty-fifty."

"Take?"

"Whatever you produce in that sacred space of yours."

"But that might be nothing."

Phil said, "Then we're stuck with fifty percent of nothing. But we like

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a gamble. We can get this facility in Jersey for free. Feeding you for a couple weeks won't cost much. And we can drive out and see how you're doing."

"Interesting," I said.

"And don't forget," Haynes put in, "you get to keep fifty percent of what you wish for."

It struck me as a pretty good deal at the time.

Phil had rented this place in northern Jersey to use as a software lab. But then the bottom went out of that business. Or they found it wouldn't be profitable under present conditions. They still had a couple months' rent paid for, so they set me up in the place. It was a small, isolated facility with a two-room apartment in back. I moved in, and Phil drove out from New York every few days with some frozen dinners.

I lived alone, saw no one — the nearest town was two miles away, I didn't have a car, and besides, what would I do there? I had books to read when I wasn't working on magic. I had a collection of Marsilio Ficino's letters. His nobility made me ashamed of myself. I knew I was being too self-seeking. But I went on anyhow. I figured, what's the sense of being a magician if you can't prove it to anyone?

A week later, on a late afternoon on a golden day in late October, the maples were just starting to turn colors. I could see birds overhead, flying south, away from the dark winter that was waiting for me. The little lawn in front of the facility was set back from the road. No one ever came by here, but she came. She came with an easel and a folding chair and a big straw purse in which she had watercolors and a bicycle bottle filled with water. She was sitting on my front lawn.

I came outside, and she got up hastily. "I didn't know anyone lived here. I hope I'm not trespassing."

"Not at all. I live here, but I don't own the place."

"But I'm intruding on your privacy."

"A welcome intrusion."

She seemed relieved. She sat down again in front of her easel.

"I'm a painter," she said. "A watercolorist. Some say that's not real painting, but it pleases me. I noticed this place a long time ago. I wanted

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to paint it, but I wanted to wait until the maples were in just the stage of bloom they're in now."

"Are they at their peak?" I asked.

"No, they're still one or two weeks from their full color. But I like them as they are right now, with the brilliant reds and oranges showing, but merging with the green leaves. It's a time of change, very fragile, and very precious. Anyone can paint a tree in full autumn foliage. But it's something else to paint one just before it explodes from cool green to hot red."

"And after that comes winter," I said.

"Exactly."

"You're very welcome to paint my trees or anything else. Perhaps it would be better if I went inside and left you undisturbed?"

"It doesn't bother me if you want to stay," she said.

"I'm Maryanne Johnson, by the way."

Maryanne set up her brushes and set to work. She sketched in the tree in hard pencil, mixed her washes, and began. She worked very quickly. Her painting was like a dance. I enjoyed watching her work. And I liked looking at her. She was not pretty, but her features were delicate, and I already knew she saw more than I did. She was a small, comfortable woman, about the same age as I, maybe a year or so younger. We talked about painting and trees and magic. At the end of two hours, the painting was done.

"I just need to give it a few minutes to dry," she said. "Then I'll spray it with an acrylic fixative and I'm out of your hair."

"Do you really have to go?"

"It's time for me to go," she said, not answering me directly.

"All right," I said. "I told you that I do magic."

"Yes. It sounds wonderful."

"Let's go in and see if the *temenos* has anything for you."

"I really don't think I should go in," Maryanne said.

"Then I'll run in and see if it's left you anything."

She hesitated, then said, "Never mind, I'll go in with you. I'd like to see where you live."

Inside we walked quickly through the cold, polished laboratory space,

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to the closet. I opened the door. In the shrine, under the red light, there was something oval-shaped and made of metal. I picked it up. It appeared to be of silver.

I led her outside into the fading afternoon light and said, "I think it's a pendant of some sort. Magic meant it for you. Please accept the gift."

Gravely Maryanne took it and turned it over and over in her fingers.

"Well," she said, "I didn't expect the day to turn out like this."

"Nor did I. May I see you again?"

"You know the Albatross Restaurant in town? I'm a hostess there."

And then she was gone and the gloom of my laboratory closed in on me. I walked up and down the silent room, between the work stations, with the last light of the late afternoon sun slanting in. It was quiet in here, always quiet, a sort of concrete tomb. And I had put myself into it.

I thought about magic and its practitioners. What kind of lives had they had? Lonely, boring, and dangerous. The only happily married magic-worker from the past I could think of was Nicholas Flamel and his precious Perrenelle. And he was very much the exception. In my rush to join the ranks of magicians, to be counted among them, I hadn't really considered what I was getting into.

Suddenly magic seemed to me a poor enterprise indeed, one that excluded the human dimension. At that moment, I made up my mind.

THAT EVENING, in response to my telephone calls, they all assembled at the facility. There was Phil and Jon, and Haynes, and two others I hadn't met before. They had cassette recorders with them, and even a video camera. I felt strangely calm. I knew this was going to be the last act, good or bad, fair or foul.

I took them with me into the closet with its *temenos*. It was small and narrow, but it held all of us, with the partners strung out in the narrow space behind me, and Phil at my shoulder with the video camera.

"You're actually going to let us watch?" Phil said. "Will wonders never cease!"

"You'll get the whole show," I said. "For better or worse."

"What should we ask for?" Haynes asked.

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I shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"A million dollars in gold sounds pretty good to me," Phil said.

"You think the spirit or whatever it is can do that?" Jon asked.

"Magic can do anything," I said. "The question is whether it wants to or not. If this works, the wished-for matter will appear before your very eyes, here in the space of the *temenos.*"

"You always gave it overnight before," Phil said.

"I'm in a hurry now."

I turned to the *temenos.* I began my incantations and my gestures.

There's no need to talk here about what I did. Phil's friends have a complete record — if they dare look at it after what happened.

At the end of my ceremony, there was a growing darkness in the middle of the shrine. It started as a stillness, but there was a fury within that stillness. You could feel the presence of something malevolent and strange. A cold wind came up inside the closed dark room, and the partners began to edge away.

"What have you done?" Haynes asked.

"Merely asked for what you want."

Now the darkness in the middle of the *temenos* was a spinning top of dark and luminous lines. It gave off a disturbed emanation, as though some creature had been called into being and didn't like it at all.

The darkness formed up into a crouched, dark creature in the middle of the shrine, its luminous eyes slanted and strange.

"Who is calling me?" the dark creature said.

"It's me," I said. "My friends here would like a million dollars in gold."

"You bother me for a trivial matter like that? Very well, they can have it. But it must be paid back."

"Paid back?" Phil said. "I didn't know it worked like that."

"We have to get our investment back," the dark creature told him. "Our resources are not without limit. But our terms are easy: five years to repay, no interest or carrying charges."

Phil held a hasty consultation with his partners. It was obvious to them that they'd earn considerable interest on a million dollars over five years. It made this a paying proposition.

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"Yes, sir," Phil said to the creature. "We'd like to take you up on that. That would be very acceptable, sir."

"Who will be personally responsible for repaying this debt?" the dark creature asked.

"My backers and I, sir."

"Your backers?" the dark creature said scornfully. "To hell with that! I need one person! Who will hold himself *personally* responsible for this debt?"

"I will, sir," Phil said.

"And who are you?"

"I'm Phil."

"Fine. Then I'll take you as collateral."

"Hey, just a minute," Phil said. "I didn't intend — " Then he was pulled into the darkness so fast he was cut off in mid-scream. One moment he was there, the next moment he was gone.

"I'll expect repayment in five years," the darkness said. "Then you get Phil back. Or what's left of him."

Like a wisp of smoke, the dark creature was gone. But now there was a pile of gold in the shrine. A pile that looked like a million dollars' worth.

The partners stared at it uneasily.

Finally Haynes said, "It's a lot of money."

"Sure," Jon said, "but how about Phil?"

"Well, it *was* his idea."

"But we can't leave him wherever that thing has taken him. And certainly not for five years!"

"No, that wouldn't be fair," Haynes said thoughtfully. "But what do you think about thirty days?"

They looked at each other. Then Jon said, "Phil himself wanted to make a profit on this. And besides, what the hell, he's there already."

Haynes nodded. "Thirty days wherever he is can't be so bad. I'm sure he'll have quite a story to tell when he gets back." He turned to me. "What do you think?"

"I'm finished with magic," I said. "But I'll be available when you need me to bring Phil back."

"You get a share of this," Haynes said, pointing to the gold.

"No thanks, I don't want any."

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"Phil said you had some funny ideas. He'll be amused by this when he gets back."

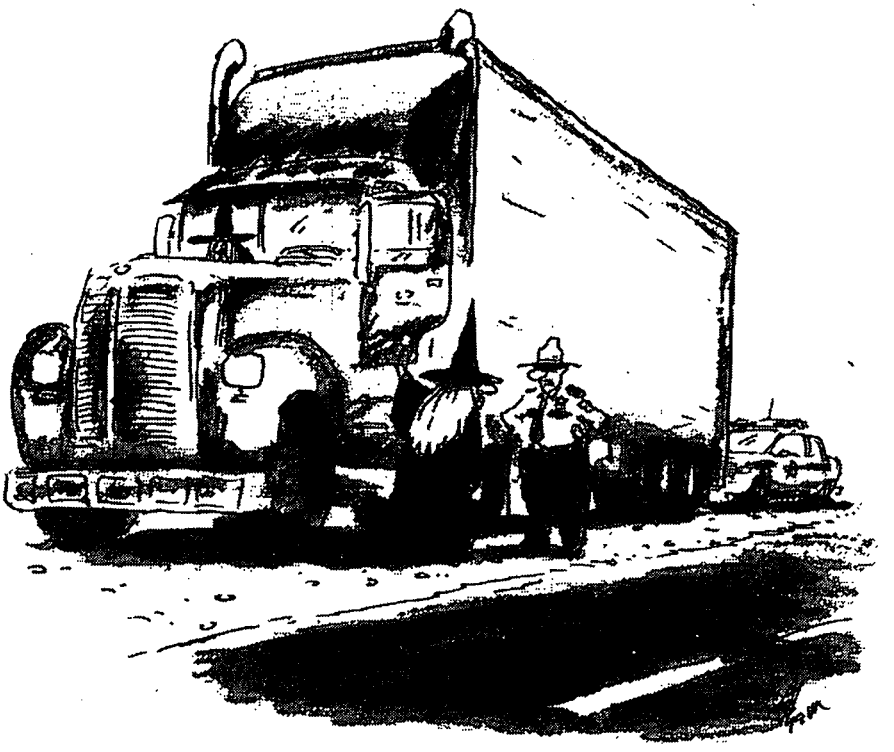
"True. If you get him back alive."

"Damn, that's right," Jon said.

"Sure hope he's okay," Haynes said. "Hey, where are you going?"

"The Albatross Restaurant. I understand they have the best food available anywhere." And I walked out the door.

It seemed to me that both the partners and I had profited. They had gotten a million dollars at the possible cost of Phil. I had maybe gotten a chance at a life with Maryanne. At what price I was still to learn. ☙



"I'm going to have to inspect the contents."

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One of the grand themes in literature is how we decide the fates of those who can't help themselves. Through the lens of an alternative history, James Morrow now focuses on that question with powerful results—and along the way, he shares with us something about the secret hostilities of the saints.

Mr. Morrow's witty novels and stories include This Is the Way the World Ends, City of Truth, *and* Only Begotten Daughter. *He recently published the final volume of his God-is-dead trilogy,* The Eternal Footman, *and he is working on a novel about the birth of the scientific point of view entitled* The Last Witchfinder. *He has also dabbled with amateur theater recently, including a one-act play entitled "The Zombies of Montrose."*

Auspicious Eggs

By James Morrow

FATHER CORNELIUS DENNIS Monaghan of Charlestown Parish, Connie to his friends, sets down the styrofoam chalice, turns from the corrugated cardboard altar, and approaches the two women standing by the resin baptismal font. The font is six-sided and encrusted with saints, like a gigantic hex nut forged for some obscure yet holy purpose, but its most impressive feature is its portability. Hardly a month passes in which Connie doesn't drive the vessel across town, bear it into some wretched hovel, and confer immortality on a newborn whose parents have grown too feeble to leave home.

"Merribell, right?" asks Connie, pointing to the baby on his left.

Wedged in the crook of her mother's arm, the infant wriggles and howls. "No — Madelaine," Angela mumbles. Connie has known Angela Dunfey all her life, and he still remembers the seraphic glow that beamed from her face when she first received the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Today she boasts no such glow. Her cheeks and brow appear tarnished, like iron corroded by the Greenhouse Deluge, and her spine curls with a

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torsion more commonly seen in women three times her age. "Merribell's over here." Angela raises her free hand and gestures toward her cousin Lorna, who is balancing Madelaine's twin sister atop her gravid belly. Will Lorna Dunfey, Connie wonders, also give birth to twins? The phenomenon, he has heard, runs in families.

Touching the sleeve of Angela's frayed blue sweater, the priest addresses her in a voice that travels clear across the nave. "Have these children received the Sacrament of Reproductive Potential Assessment?"

The parishioner shifts a nugget of chewing gum from her left cheek to her right. "Y-yes," she says at last.

Henry Shaw, the pale altar boy, his face abloom with acne, hands the priest a parchment sheet stamped with the Seal of the Boston Isle Archdiocese. A pair of signatures adorns the margin, verifying that two ecclesiastical representatives have legitimized the birth. Connie instantly recognizes the illegible hand of Archbishop Xallibos. Below lie the bold loops and assured serifs of a Friar James Wolfe, M.D., doubtless the man who drew the blood.

Madelaine Dunfey, Connie reads. *Left ovary: 315 primordial follicles. Right ovary: 340 primordial follicles.* A spasm of despair passes through the priest. The egg-cell count for each organ should be 180,000 at least. It's a verdict of infertility, no possible appeal, no imaginable reprieve.

With an efficiency bordering on effrontery, Henry Shaw offers Connie a second parchment sheet.

Merribell Dunfey. Left ovary: 290 primordial follicles. Right ovary: 310 primordial follicles. The priest is not surprised. What sense would there be in God's withholding the power of procreation from one twin but not the other? Connie now needs only to receive these barren sisters, apply the sacred rites, and furtively pray that the Fourth Lateran Council was indeed guided by the Holy Spirit when it undertook to bring the baptismal process into the age of testable destinies and ovarian surveillance.

He holds out his hands, withered palms up, a posture he maintains as Angela surrenders Madelaine, reaches under the baby's christening gown, and unhooks both diaper pins. The mossy odor of fresh urine wafts into the Church of the Immediate Conception. Sighing profoundly, Angela hands the sopping diaper to her cousin.

"Bless these waters, O Lord," says Connie, spotting his ancient face

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in the baptismal fluid, "that they might grant these sinners the gift of life everlasting." Turning from the font, he presents Madelaine to his ragged flock, over three hundred natural-born Catholics — sixth-generation Irish, mostly, plus a smattering of Portuguese, Italians, and Croats — interspersed with two dozen recent converts of Korean and Vietnamese extraction: a congregation bound together, he'll admit, less by religious conviction than by shared destitution. "Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all humans enter the world in a state of depravity, and forasmuch as they cannot know the grace of our Lord except they be born anew of water, I beseech you to call upon God the Father that, through these baptisms, Madelaine and Merribell Dunfey may gain the divine kingdom." Connie faces his trembling parishioner. "Angela Dunfey, do you believe, by God's word, that children who are baptized, dying before they commit any actual evil, will be saved?"

Her "Yes" is begrudging and clipped.

Like a scrivener replenishing his pen at an inkwell, Connie dips his thumb into the font. "Angela Dunfey, name this child of yours."

"M-M-Madelaine Eileen Dunfey."

"We welcome this sinner, Madelaine Eileen Dunfey, into the mystical body of Christ" — with his wet thumb Connie traces a plus sign on the infant's forehead — "and do mark her with the Sign of the Cross."

Unraveling Madelaine from her christening gown, Connie fixes on the waters. They are preternaturally still — as calm and quiet as the Sea of Galilee after the Savior rebuked the winds. For many years the priest wondered why Christ hadn't returned on the eve of the Greenhouse Deluge, dispersing the hydrocarbon vapors with a wave of his hand, ending global warming with a Heavenward wink, but recently Connie has come to feel that divine intervention entails protocols past human ken.

He contemplates his reflected countenance. Nothing about it — not the tiny eyes, thin lips, hawk's beak of a nose — pleases him. Now he begins the immersion, sinking Madelaine Dunfey to her skullcap...her ears...cheeks...mouth...eyes.

"No!" screams Angela.

As the baby's nose goes under, mute cries spurt from her lips: bubbles inflated with bewilderment and pain. "Madelaine Dunfey," Connie intones, holding the infant down, "I baptize you in the name of the Father,

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and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." The bubbles break the surface. The fluid pours into the infant's lungs. Her silent screams cease, but she still puts up a fight.

"No! Please! No!"

A full minute passes, marked by the rhythmic shuffling of the congregation and the choked sobs of the mother. A second minute — a third — and finally the body stops moving, a mere husk, no longer home to Madelaine Dunfey's indestructible soul.

"No!"

The Sacrament of Terminal Baptism, Connie knows, is rooted in both logic and history. Even today, he can recite verbatim the preamble to the Fourth Lateran Council's *Pastoral Letter on the Rights of the Unconceived.* ("Throughout her early years, Holy Mother Church tirelessly defended the Rights of the Born. Then, as the iniquitous institution of abortion spread across Western Europe and North America, she undertook to secure the Rights of the Unborn. Now, as a new era dawns for the Church and her servants, she must make even greater efforts to propagate the gift of life everlasting, championing the Rights of the Unconceived through a Doctrine of Affirmative Fertility.") The subsequent sentence has always given Connie pause. It stopped him when he was a seminarian. It stops him today. ("This Council therefore avers that, during a period such as that in which we find ourselves, when God has elected to discipline our species through a Greenhouse Deluge and its concomitant privations, a society can commit no greater crime against the future than to squander provender on individuals congenitally incapable of procreation.") Quite so. Indeed. And yet Connie has never performed a terminal baptism without misgivings.

He scans the faithful. Valerie Gallogher, his nephews' *zaftig* kindergarten teacher, seems on the verge of tears. Keye Sung frowns. Teresa Curtoni shudders. Michael Hines moans softly. Stephen O'Rourke and his wife both wince.

"We give thanks, most merciful Father" — Connie lifts the corpse from the water — "that it pleases you to regenerate this infant and take her unto your bosom." Placing the dripping flesh on the altar, he leans toward Lorna Dunfey and lays his palm on Merribell's brow. "Angela Dunfey, name this child of yours."

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"M-M-Merribell S-Siobhan..." With a sharp reptilian hiss, Angela wrests Merribell from her cousin and pulls the infant to her breast. "Merribell Siobhan Dunfey!"

The priest steps forward, caressing the wisp of tawny hair sprouting from Merribell's cranium. "We welcome this sinner — "

Angela whirls around and, still sheltering her baby, leaps from the podium to the aisle — the very aisle down which Connie hopes one day to see her parade in prelude to receiving the Sacrament of Qualified Monogamy.

"Stop!" cries Connie.

"Angela!" shouts Lorna.

"No!" yells the altar boy.

For someone who has recently given birth to twins, Angela is amazingly spry, rushing pell-mell past the stupefied congregation and straight through the narthex.

"Please!" screams Connie.

But already she is out the door, bearing her unsaved daughter into the teeming streets of Boston Isle.

AT 8:17 P.M., Eastern Standard Time, Stephen O'Rourke's fertility reaches its weekly peak. The dial on his wrist tells him so, buzzing like a tortured hornet as he scrubs his teeth with baking soda. *Skreee,* says the sperm counter, reminding Stephen of his ineluctable duty. *Skreee, skreee:* go find us an egg.

He pauses in the middle of a brush stroke and, without bothering to rinse his mouth, strides into the bedroom.

Kate lies on the sagging mattress, smoking an unfiltered cigarette as she balances her nightly dose of iced Arbutus rum on her stomach. Baby Malcolm cuddles against his mother, gums fastened onto her left nipple. She stares at the far wall, where the cracked and scabrous plaster frames the video monitor, its screen displaying the regular Sunday night broadcast of *Keep Those Kiddies Coming.* Archbishop Xallibos, seated, dominates a TV studio appointed like a day-care center: stuffed animals, changing table, brightly colored alphabet letters. Preschoolers crawl across the prelate's Falstaffian body, sliding down his thighs and swinging from his arms as if he's a piece of playground equipment.

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"Did you know that a single act of onanism kills up to four hundred million babies in a matter of seconds?" asks Xallibos from the monitor. "As Jesus remarks in the Gospel According to Saint Andrew, 'Masturbation is murder.'"

Stephen coughs. "I don't suppose you're..."

His wife thrusts her index finger against her pursed lips. Even when engaged in shutting him out, she still looks beautiful to Stephen. Her huge eyes and high cheekbones, her elegant swanlike neck. "Shhh — "

"Please check," says Stephen, swallowing baking soda.

Kate raises her bony wrist and glances at her ovulation gauge. "Not for three days. Maybe four."

"Damn."

He loves her so dearly. He wants her so much — no less now than when they received the Sacrament of Qualified Monogamy. It's fine to have a connubial conversation, but when you utterly adore your wife, when you crave to comprehend her beyond all others, you need to speak in flesh as well.

"Will anyone deny that Hell's hottest quadrant is reserved for those who violate the rights of the unconceived?" asks Xallibos, playing peek-a-boo with a cherubic toddler. "Who will dispute that contraception, casual sex, and nocturnal emissions place their perpetrators on a one-way cruise to Perdition?"

"Honey, I have to ask you something," says Stephen.

"Shhh — "

"That young woman at Mass this morning, the one who ran away...."

"She went crazy because it was twins." Kate slurps down her remaining rum. The ice fragments clink against each other. "If it'd been just the one, she probably could've coped."

"Well, yes, of course," says Stephen, gesturing toward Baby Malcolm. "But suppose one of *your* newborns..."

"Heaven is forever, Stephen," says Kate, filling her mouth with ice, "and Hell is just as long." She chews, her molars grinding the ice. Dribbles of rum-tinted water spill from her lips. "You'd better get to church."

"Farewell, friends," says Xallibos as the theme music swells. He dandles a Korean three-year-old on his knee. "And keep those kiddies coming!"

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The path to the front door takes Stephen through the cramped and fetid living room — functionally the nursery. All is quiet, all is well. The fourteen children, one for every other year of Kate's post-menarche, sleep soundly. Nine-year-old Roger is quite likely his, product of the time Stephen and Kate got their cycles in synch; the boy boasts Stephen's curly blond hair and riveting green eyes. Difficult as it is, Stephen refuses to accord Roger any special treatment — no private trips to the frog pond, no second candy cane at Christmas. A good stepfather didn't indulge in favoritism.

Stephen pulls on his mended galoshes, fingerless gloves, and torn pea jacket. Ambling out of the apartment, he joins the knot of morose pedestrians as they shuffle along Winthrop Street. A fog descends, a steady rain falls: reverberations from the Deluge. Pushed by expectant mothers, dozens of shabby, black-hooded baby buggies squeak mournfully down the asphalt. The sidewalks belong to adolescent girls, gang after gang, gossiping among themselves and stomping on puddles as they show off their pregnancies like Olympic medals.

Besmirched by two decades of wind and drizzle, a limestone Madonna stands outside the Church of the Immediate Conception. Her expression lies somewhere between a smile and a smirk. Stephen climbs the steps, enters the narthex, removes his gloves, and, dipping his fingertips into the nearest font, decorates the air with the Sign of the Cross.

Every city, Stephen teaches his students at Cardinal Dougherty High School, boasts its own personality. Extroverted Rio, pessimistic Prague, paranoid New York. And Boston Isle? What sort of psyche inhabits the Hub and its surrounding reefs? Schizoid, Stephen tells them. Split. The Boston that battled slavery and stoked the fires beneath the American melting pot was the same Boston that massacred the Pequots and sent witchfinders to Salem. But here, now, which side of the city is emergent? The bright one, Stephen decides, picturing the hundreds of Heaven-bound souls who each day exit Boston's innumerable wombs, flowing forth like the bubbles that so recently streamed from Madelaine Dunfey's lips.

Blessing the Virgin's name, he descends the concrete stairs to the copulatorium. A hundred votive candles pierce the darkness. The briny scent of incipient immortality suffuses the air. In the far corner, a CD

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player screeches out the Apostolic Succession doing their famous rendition of "Ave Maria."

The Sacrament of Extramarital Intercourse has always reminded Stephen of a junior high prom. Girls strung along one side of the room, boys along the other, gyrating couples in the center. He takes his place in the line of males, removes his jacket, shirt, trousers, and underclothes, and hangs them on the nearest pegs. He stares through the gloom, locking eyes with Roger's old kindergarten teacher, Valerie Gallogher, a robust thirtyish woman whose incandescent red hair spills all the way to her hips. Grimly they saunter toward each other, following the pathway formed by the mattresses, until they meet amid the morass of writhing soulmakers.

"You're Roger Mulcanny's stepfather, aren't you?" asks the ovulating teacher.

"Father, quite possibly. Stephen O'Rourke. And you're Miss Gallogher, right?"

"Call me Valerie."

"Stephen."

He glances around, noting to his infinite relief that he recognizes no one. Sooner or later, he knows, a familiar young face will appear at the copulatorium, a notion that never fails to make him wince. How could he possibly explicate the Boston Massacre to a boy who'd recently beheld him in the procreative act? How could he render the Battle of Lexington lucid to a girl whose egg he'd attempted to quicken the previous night?

For ten minutes he and Valerie make small talk, most of it issuing from Stephen, as was proper. Should the coming sacrament prove fruitful, the resultant child will want to know about the handful of men with whom his mother connected during the relevant ovulation. (Beatrice, Claude, Tommy, Laura, Yolanda, Willy, and the others were forever grilling Kate for facts about their possible progenitors.) Stephen tells Valerie about the time his students gave him a surprise birthday party. He describes his rock collection. He mentions his skill at trapping the singularly elusive species of rat that inhabits Charlestown Parish.

"I have a talent too," says Valerie, inserting a coppery braid into her mouth. Her areolas seem to be staring at him.

"Roger thought you were a terrific teacher."

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"No — something else." Valerie tugs absently on her ovulation gauge. "A person twitches his lips a certain way, and I know what he's feeling. He darts his eyes in an odd manner — I sense the drift of his thoughts." She lowers her voice. "I watched you during the baptism this morning. Your reaction would've angered the archbishop — am I right?"

Stephen looks at his bare toes. Odd that a copulatorium partner should be demanding such intimacy of him.

"Am I?" Valerie persists, sliding her index finger along her large, concave bellybutton.

Fear rushes through Stephen. Does this woman work for the Immortality Corps? If his answer smacks of heresy, will she arrest him on the spot?

"Well, Stephen? Would the archbishop have been angry?"

"Perhaps," he confesses. In his mind he sees Madelaine Dunfey's submerged mouth, bubble following bubble like beads strung along a rosary.

"There's no microphone in my navel," Valerie asserts, alluding to a common Immortality Corps ploy. "I'm not a spy."

"Never said you were."

"You were thinking it. I could tell by the cant of your eyebrows." She kisses him on the mouth, deeply, wetly. "Did Roger ever learn to hold his pencil correctly?"

"'Fraid not."

"Too bad."

At last the mattress to Stephen's left becomes free, and they climb on top and begin reifying the Doctrine of Affirmative Fertility. The candle flames look like spear points. Stephen closes his eyes, but the effect is merely to intensify the fact that he's here. The liquid squeal of flesh against flesh grows louder, the odor of hot paraffin and warm semen more pungent. For a few seconds he manages to convince himself that the woman beneath him is Kate, but the illusion proves as tenuous as the surrounding wax.

When the sacrament is accomplished, Valerie says, "I have something for you. A gift."

"What's the occasion?"

"Saint Patrick's Day is less than a week away."

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"Since when is that a time for gifts?"

Instead of answering, she strolls to her side of the room, rummages through her tangled garments, and returns holding a pressed flower sealed in plastic.

"Think of it as a ticket," she whispers, lifting Stephen's shirt from its peg and slipping the blossom inside the pocket.

"To where?"

Valerie holds an erect index finger to her lips. "We'll know when we get there."

Stephen gulps audibly. Sweat collects beneath his sperm counter. Only fools consider fleeing Boston Isle. Only lunatics risk the retributions meted out by the Corps. Displayed every Sunday night on *Keep Those Kiddies Coming*, the classic images — men submitting to sperm siphons, women locked in the rapacious embrace of artificial inseminators — haunt every parishioner's imagination, instilling the same levels of dread as Spinelli's sculpture of the archangel Chamuel strangling David Hume. There were rumors, of course, unconfirmable accounts of parishioners who've outmaneuvered the patrol boats and escaped to Québec Cay, Seattle Reef, or the Texas Archipelago. But to credit such tales was itself a kind of sin, jeopardizing your slot in Paradise as surely as if you'd denied the unconceived their rights.

"Tell me something, Stephen." Valerie straps herself into her bra. "You're a history teacher. Did Saint Patrick really drive the snakes out of Ireland, or is that just a legend?"

"I'm sure it never happened literally," says Stephen. "I suppose it could be true in some mythic sense."

"It's about penises, isn't it?" says Valerie, dissolving into the darkness. "It's about how our saints have always been hostile to cocks."

ALTHOUGH HARBOR Authority Tower was designed to house the merchant-shipping aristocracy on whose ambitions the decrepit Boston economy still depended, the building's form, Connie now realizes, perfectly fits its new, supplemental function: sheltering the offices, courts, and archives of the archdiocese. As he lifts his gaze along the soaring facade, Connie thinks of sacred shapes — of steeples and vaulted

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windows, of Sinai and Zion, of Jacob's Ladder and hands pressed together in prayer. Perhaps it's all as God wants, he muses, flashing his ecclesiastical pass to the guard. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with commerce and grace being transacted within the same walls.

Connie has seen Archbishop Xallibos in person only once before, five years earlier, when the stately prelate appeared as an "honorary Irishman" in Charlestown Parish's annual Saint Patrick's Day Parade. Standing on the sidewalk, Connie observed Xallibos gliding down Lynde Street atop a huge motorized shamrock. The archbishop looked impressive then, and he looks impressive now — six foot four at least, Connie calculates, and not an ounce under three hundred pounds. His eyes are as red as a lab rat's.

"Father Cornelius Dennis Monaghan," the priest begins, following the custom whereby a visitor to an archbishop's chambers initiates the interview by naming himself.

"Come forward, Father Cornelius Dennis Monaghan."

Connie starts into the office, boots clacking on the polished bronze floor. Xallibos steps from behind his desk, a glistery cube of black marble.

"Charlestown Parish holds a special place in my affections," says the archbishop. "What brings you to this part of town?"

Connie fidgets, shifting first left, then right, until his face lies mirrored in the hubcap-size Saint Cyril medallion adorning Xallibos's chest. "My soul is in torment, Your Grace."

"'Torment.' Weighty word."

"I can find no other. Last Tuesday I laid a two-week-old infant to rest."

"Terminal baptism?"

Connie ponders his reflection. It is wrinkled and deflated, like a helium balloon purchased at a carnival long gone. "My eighth."

"I know how you feel. After I dispatched my first infertile — no left testicle, right one shriveled beyond repair — I got no sleep for a week." Eyes glowing like molten rubies, Xallibos stares directly at Connie. "Where did you attend seminary?"

"Isle of Denver."

"And on the Isle of Denver did they teach you that there are in fact two Churches, one invisible and eternal, the other — "

"Temporal and finite."

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"Then they also taught you that the latter Church is empowered to revise its sacraments according to the imperatives of the age." The archbishop's stare grows brighter, hotter, purer. "Do you doubt that present privations compel us to arrange early immortality for those who cannot secure the rights of the unconceived?"

"The problem is that the infant I immortalized has a twin." Connie swallows nervously. "Her mother stole her away before I could perform the second baptism."

"Stole her away?"

"She fled in the middle of the sacrament."

"And the second child is likewise arid?"

"Left ovary, two hundred ninety primordials. Right ovary, three hundred ten."

"Lord..." A high whistle issues from the archbishop, like water vapor escaping a tea kettle. "Does she intend to quit the island?"

"I certainly hope not, Your Grace," says the priest, wincing at the thought. "She probably has no immediate plans beyond protecting her baby and trying to — "

Connie cuts himself off, intimidated by the sudden arrival of a roly-poly man in a white hooded robe.

"Friar James Wolfe, M.D.," says the monk.

"Come forward, Friar Doctor James Wolfe," says Xallibos.

"It would be well if you validated this posthaste." James Wolfe draws a parchment sheet from his robe and lays it on the archbishop's desk. Connie steals a glance at the report, hoping to learn the baby's fertility quotient, but the relevant statistics are too faint. "The priest in question, he's celebrating Mass in" — sliding a loose sleeve upward, James Wolfe consults his wristwatch — "less than an hour. He's all the way over in Brookline."

Striding back to his desk, the archbishop yanks a silver fountain pen from its holder and decorates the parchment with his famous spidery signature.

"*Dominus vobiscum*, Friar Doctor Wolfe," he says, handing over the document.

As Wolfe rushes out of the office, Xallibos steps so close to Connie that his nostrils fill with the archbishop's lemon-scented aftershave lotion.

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"That man never has any fun," says Xallibos, pointing toward the vanishing friar. "What fun do you have, Father Monaghan?"

"Fun, Your Grace?"

"Do you eat ice cream? Follow the fortunes of the Celtics?" He pronounces "Celtics" with the hard *C* mandated by the Third Lateran Council.

Connie inhales a hearty quantity of citrus fumes. "I bake."

"Bake? Bake what? Bread?"

"Cookies, Your Grace. Brownies, cheesecake, pies. For the Feast of the Nativity, I make gingerbread magi."

"Wonderful. I like my priests to have fun. Listen, no matter what, the rite must be performed. If Angela Dunfey won't come to you, then you must go to her."

"She'll simply run away again."

"Perhaps so, perhaps not. I have great faith in you, Father Cornelius Dennis Monaghan."

"More than I have in myself," says the priest, biting his inner cheeks so hard that his eyes fill with tears.

"No," says Kate for the third time that night.

"Yes," insists Stephen, savoring the dual satisfactions of Kate's thigh beneath his palm and Arbutus rum washing through his brain.

Pinching her cigarette in one hand, Kate strokes Baby Malcolm's forehead with the other, lulling him to sleep. "It's wicked," she protests as she places Malcolm on the rug beside the bed. "A crime against the future."

Stephen grabs the Arbutus bottle, pours himself another glass, and, adding a measure of Dr. Pepper, takes a greedy gulp. He sets the bottle back on the nightstand, next to Valerie Gallogher's enigmatic flower.

"Screw the unconceived," he says, throwing himself atop his wife.

On Friday he'd shown the blossom to Gail Whittington, Dougherty High School's smartest science teacher, but her verdict proved unenlightening. *Epigaea repens*, "trailing arbutus," a species with at least two claims to fame: it is the state flower of the Massachusetts Archipelago, and it has lent its name to the very brand of alcohol Stephen now consumes.

"No," says Kate once again. She drops her cigarette on the floor,

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crushes it with her shoe, and wraps her arms around him. "I'm not ovulating," she avers, forcing her stiff and slippery tongue inside his mouth. "Your sperm aren't..."

"Last night, the Holy Father received a vision," Xallibos announces from the video monitor. "Pictures straight from Satan's flaming domain. Hell is a fact, friends. It's as real as a stubbed toe."

Stephen whips off Kate's chemise with all the dexterity of Father Monaghan removing a christening gown. The rum, of course, has much to do with their mutual willingness (four glasses each, only mildly diluted with Dr. Pepper), but beyond the Arbutus the two of them have truly earned this moment. Neither has ever skipped Mass. Neither has ever missed a Sacrament of Extramarital Intercourse. And while any act of nonconceptual love technically lies beyond the Church's powers of absolution, surely Christ will forgive them a solitary lapse. And so they go at it, this sterile union, this forbidden fruitlessness, this coupling from which no soul can come.

"Hedonists dissolving in vats of molten sulfur," says Xallibos.

The bedroom door squeals open. One of Kate's middle children, Beatrice, a gaunt six-year-old with flaking skin, enters holding a rude toy boat whittled from a hunk of bark.

"Look what I made in school yesterday!"

"We're busy," says Kate, pulling the tattered muslin sheet over her nakedness.

"Do you like my boat, Stephen?" asks Beatrice.

He slams a pillow atop his groin. "Lovely, dear."

"Go back to bed," Kate commands her daughter.

"Onanists drowning in lakes of boiling semen," says Xallibos.

Beatrice fixes Stephen with her receding eyes. "Can we sail it tomorrow on Parson's Pond?"

"Certainly. Of course. Please go away."

"Just you and me, right, Stephen? Not Claude or Tommy or Yolanda or *anybody*."

"Flaying machines," says Xallibos, "peeling the damned like ripe bananas."

"Do you want a spanking?" seethes Kate. "That's exactly what you're going to get, young lady, the worst spanking of your whole life!"

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The child issues an elaborate shrug and strides off in a huff.

"I love you," Stephen tells his wife, removing the pillow from his privates like a chef lifting the lid from a stew pot.

Again they press together, throwing all they have into it, every limb and gland and orifice, no holds barred, no positions banned.

"Unpardonable," Kate groans.

"Unpardonable," Stephen agrees. He's never been so excited. His entire body is an appendage to his loins.

"We'll be damned," she says.

"Forever," he echoes.

"Kiss me," she commands.

"Farewell, friends," says Xallibos. "And keep those kiddies coming!"

WRESTLING THE resin baptismal font from the trunk of his car, Connie ponders the vessel's resemblance to a birdbath — a place, he muses, for pious sparrows to accomplish their avian ablutions. As he sets the vessel on his shoulder and starts away, its edges digging into his flesh, a different metaphor suggests itself. But if the font is Connie's Cross, and Constitution Road his Via Dolorosa, where does that leave his upcoming mission to Angela Dunfey? Is he about to perform some mysterious act of vicarious atonement?

"Morning, Father."

He slips the font from his shoulder, standing it upright beside a fire hydrant. His parishioner Valerie Gallogher weaves amid the mob, dressed in a threadbare woolen parka.

"Far to go?" she asks brightly.

"End of the block."

"Want help?"

"I need the exercise."

Valerie extends her arm and they shake hands, mitten clinging to mitten. "Made any special plans for Saint Patrick's Day?"

"I'm going to bake shamrock cookies."

"Green?"

"Can't afford food coloring."

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"I think I've got some green — you're welcome to it. Who's at the end of the block?"

"Angela Dunfey."

A shadow flits across Valerie's face. "And her daughter?"

"Yes," moans Connie. His throat constricts. "Her daughter."

Valerie lays a sympathetic hand on his arm. "If I don't have green, we can probably fake it."

"Oh, Valerie, Valerie — I wish I'd never taken Holy Orders."

"We'll mix yellow with orange. I'm sorry, Father."

"I wish this cup would pass."

"I mean yellow with blue."

Connie loops his arms around the font, embracing it as he might a frightened child. "Stay with me."

Together they walk through the serrated March air and, reaching the Warren Avenue intersection, enter the tumble-down pile of bricks labeled No. 47. The foyer is as dim as a crypt. Switching on his penlight, Connie holds it aloft until he discerns the label *A. Dunfey* glued to a dented mailbox. He begins the climb to apartment 8-C, his parishioner right behind. On the third landing, Connie stops to catch his breath. On the sixth, he sets down the font. Valerie wipes his brow with her parka sleeve. She takes up the font, and the two of them resume their ascent.

Angela Dunfey's door is wormy, cracked, and hanging by one hinge. The mere act of knocking swings it open.

They find themselves in the kitchen — a small musty space that would have felt claustrophobic were it not so sparely furnished. A saucepan hangs over the stove; a frying pan sits atop the icebox; the floor is a mottle of splinters, tar paper, and leprous shards of linoleum. Valerie places the font next to the sink. The basin in which Angela Dunfey washes her dishes, Connie notes, is actually smaller than the one in which the Church of the Immediate Conception immortalizes infertiles.

He tiptoes into the bedroom. His parishioner sleeps soundly, her terrycloth bathrobe parted down the middle to accommodate her groggy, nursing infant; milk trickles from her breasts, streaking her belly with white rivulets. He must move now, quickly and deliberately, so there'll be no struggle, no melodramatic replay of 1 Kings 3:27, the desperate whore trying to tear her baby away from Solomon's swordsman.

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Inhaling slowly, Connie leans toward the mattress and, with the dexterity of a weasel extracting the innards from an eggshell, slides the barren baby free and carries her into the kitchen.

Beside the icebox Valerie sits glowering on a wobbly three-legged stool.

"Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all humans enter the world in a state of depravity," Connie whispers, casting a wary eye on Valerie, "and forasmuch as they cannot know the grace of our Lord except they be born anew of water" — he lays the infant on the floor near Valerie's feet — "I beseech you to call upon God the Father that, through this baptism, Merribell Dunfey may gain the divine kingdom."

"Don't beseech *me*," snaps Valerie.

Connie fills the saucepan, dumps the water into the font, and returns to the sink for another load — not exactly holy water, he muses, not remotely chrism, but presumably not typhoidal either, the best the underbudgeted Boston Water Authority has to offer. He deposits the load, then fetches another.

A wide, milky yawn twists Merribell's face, but she does not cry out.

At last the vessel is ready. "Bless these waters, O Lord, that they might grant this sinner the gift of life everlasting."

Dropping to his knees, Connie begins removing the infant's diaper. The first pin comes out easily. As he pops the second, the tip catches the ball of his thumb. Crown of thorns, he decides, feeling the sting, seeing the blood.

He bears the naked infant to the font. Wetting his punctured thumb, he touches Merribell's brow and draws the sacred plus sign with a mixture of blood and water. "We receive this sinner unto the mystical body of Christ, and do mark her with the Sign of the Cross."

He begins the immersion. Skullcap. Ears. Cheeks. Mouth. Eyes. O Lord, what a monstrous trust, this power to underwrite a person's soul. "Merribell Dunfey, I baptize you in the name of the Father..."

Now comes the nausea, excavating Stephen's alimentary canal as he kneels before the porcelain toilet bowl. His guilt pours forth in a searing flood — acidic strands of cabbage, caustic lumps of potato, glutinous strings of bile. Yet these pains are nothing, he knows, compared with what he'll experience on passing from this world to the next.

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Drained, he stumbles toward the bedroom. Somehow Kate has bundled the older children off to school before collapsing on the floor alongside the baby. She shivers with remorse. Shrieks and giggles pour from the nursery: the preschoolers engaged in a raucous game of Blind Man's Bluff.

"Flaying machines," she mutters. Her tone is beaten, bloodless. She lights a cigarette. "Peeling the damned like..."

Will more rum help, Stephen wonders, or merely make them sicker? He extends his arm. Passing over the nightstand, his fingers touch a box of aspirin, brush the preserved *Epigaea repens*, and curl around the neck of the half-full Arbutus bottle. A ruddy cockroach scurries across the doily.

"I kept Willy home today," says Kate, taking a drag. "He says his stomach hurts."

As he raises the bottle, Stephen realizes for the first time that the label contains a block of type headed *The Story of Trailing Arbutus*. "His stomach *always* hurts." He studies the breezy little paragraph.

"I think he's telling the truth."

Epigaea repens. Trailing arbutus. Mayflower. And suddenly everything is clear.

"What's today's date?" asks Stephen.

"Sixteenth."

"March sixteenth?"

"Yeah."

"Then tomorrow's Saint Patrick's Day."

"So what?"

"Tomorrow's Saint Patrick's Day" — like an auctioneer accepting a final bid, Stephen slams the bottle onto the nightstand — "and Valerie Gallogher will be leaving Boston Isle."

"Roger's old teacher? Leaving?"

"Leaving." Snatching up the preserved flower, he dangles it before his wife. "Leaving..."

"...and of the Son," says Connie, raising the sputtering infant from the water, "and of the Holy Ghost."

Merribell Dunfey screeches and squirms. She's slippery as a bar of soap. Connie manages to wrap her in a dish towel and shove her into Valerie's arms.

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"Let me tell you who you are," she says.

"Father Cornelius Dennis Monaghan of Charlestown Parish."

"You're a tired and bewildered pilgrim, Father. You're a weary wayfarer like myself."

Dribbling milk, Angela Dunfey staggers into the kitchen. Seeing her priest, she recoils. Her mouth flies open, and a howl rushes out, a cry such as Connie imagines the damned spew forth while rotating on the spits of Perdition. "Not her too! Not Merribell! No!"

"Your baby's all right," says Valerie.

Connie clasps his hands together, fingers knotted in agony and supplication. He stoops. His knees hit the floor, crashing against the fractured linoleum. "Please," he groans.

Angela plucks Merribell from Valerie and affixes the squalling baby to her nipple. "Oh, Merribell, Merribell..."

"Please." Connie's voice is hoarse and jagged, as if he's been shot in the larynx. "Please...please," he beseeches. Tears roll from his eyes, tickling his cheeks as they fall.

"It's not *her* job to absolve you," says Valerie.

Connie snuffles the mucus back into his nose. "I know."

"The boat leaves tomorrow."

"Boat?" Connie runs his sleeve across his face, blotting his tears.

"A rescue vessel," his parishioner explains. Sliding her hands beneath his armpits, she raises him inch by inch to his feet. "Rather like Noah's Ark."

"Mommy, I want to go home."
"Tell that to your stepfather."
"It's cold."
"I know, sweetheart."
"And dark."
"Try to be patient."
"Mommy, my stomach hurts."
"I'm sorry."
"My head too."
"You want an aspirin?"
"I want to go home."

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Is this a mistake? wonders Stephen. Shouldn't they all be in bed right now instead of tromping around in this nocturnal mist, risking flu and possibly pneumonia? And yet he has faith. Somewhere in the labyrinthine reaches of the Hoosac Docks, amid the tang of salt air and the stink of rotting cod, a ship awaits.

Guiding his wife and stepchildren down Pier 7, he studies the possibilities — the scows and barges, the tugs and trawlers, the reefers and bulk carriers. Gulls and gannets hover above the wharfs, squawking their chronic disapproval of the world. Across the channel, lit by a sodium-vapor searchlight, the *U.S. Constitution* bobs in her customary berth beside Charlestown Navy Yard.

"What're we doing here, anyway?" asks Beatrice.

"Your stepfather gets these notions in his head." Kate presses the baby tight against her chest, shielding him from the sea breeze.

"What's the *name* of the boat?" asks Roger.

"*Mayflower,*" answers Stephen.

Epigaea repens, trailing arbutus, mayflower.

"How do you spell it?" Roger demands.

"M-a-y..."

"...f-l-o-w-e-r?"

"Good job, Roger," says Stephen.

"I *read* it," the boy explains indignantly, pointing straight ahead with the collective fingers of his right mitten.

Fifty yards away, moored between an oil tanker and a bait shack, a battered freighter rides the incoming tide. Her stern displays a single word, *Mayflower,* a name that to the inhabitants of Boston Isle means far more than the sum of its letters.

"Now can we go home?" asks Roger.

"No," says Stephen. He has taught the story countless times. The Separatists' departure from England for Virginia...their hazardous voyage...their unplanned landing on Plymouth Rock...the signing of the covenant whereby the non-Separatists on board agreed to obey whatever rules the Separatists imposed. "*Now* we can go on a nice long voyage."

"On *that* thing?" asks Willy.

"You're not serious," says Laura.

"Not me," says Claude.

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"Forget it," says Yolanda.

"Sayonara," says Tommy.

"I think I'm going to throw up," says Beatrice.

"It's not your decision," Stephen tells his stepchildren. He stares at the ship's hull, blotched with rust, blistered with decay, another victim of the Deluge. A passenger whom he recognizes as his neighbor Michael Hines leans out a porthole like a prairie dog peering from its burrow. "Until further notice, I make all the rules."

Half by entreaty, half by coercion, he leads his disgruntled family up the gangplank and onto the quarterdeck, where a squat man in an orange raincoat and a maroon watch cap demands to see their ticket.

"Happy Saint Patrick's Day," says Stephen, flourishing the preserved blossom.

"We're putting you people on the fo'c'sle deck," the man yells above the growl of the idling engines. "You can hide behind the pianos. At ten o'clock you get a bran muffin and a cup of coffee."

As Stephen guides his stepchildren in a single file up the forward ladder, the crew of the *Mayflower* reels in the mooring lines and ravels up the anchor chains, setting her adrift. The engines kick in. Smoke pours from the freighter's twin stacks. Sunlight seeps across the bay, tinting the eastern sky hot pink and making the island's many-windowed towers glitter like Christmas trees.

A sleek Immortality Corps cutter glides by, headed for the wharfs, evidently unaware that enemies of the unconceived lie close at hand.

Slowly, cautiously, Stephen negotiates the maze of wooden crates — it seems as if every piano on Boston Isle is being exported today — until he reaches the starboard bulwark. As he curls his palm around the rail, the *Mayflower* cruises past the Mystic Shoals, maneuvering amid the rocks like a skier following a slalom course.

"Hello, Stephen." A large woman lurches into view, abruptly kissing his cheek.

He gulps, blinking like a man emerging into sunlight from the darkness of a copulatorium. Valerie Gallogher's presence on the *Mayflower* doesn't surprise him, but he's taken aback by her companions. Angela Dunfey, suckling little Merribell. Her cousin, Lorna, still spectacularly pregnant. And, most shocking of all, Father Monaghan,

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leaning his frail frame against his baptismal font.

Stephen says, "Did we...? Are you...?"

"My blood has spoken," Valerie Gallogher replies, her red hair flying like a pennant. "In nine months I give birth to our child."

Whereupon the sky above Stephen's head begins swarming with tiny black birds. No, not birds, he realizes: devices. Ovulation gauges sail through the air, a dozen at first, then scores, then hundreds, immediately pursued by equal numbers of sperm counters. As the little machines splash down and sink, darkening the harbor like the contraband tea from an earlier moment in the history of Boston insurgency, a muffled but impassioned cheer arises among the stowaways.

"Hello, Father Monaghan." Stephen unstraps his sperm counter. "Didn't expect to find *you* here."

The priest smiles feebly, drumming his fingers on the lip of the font. "Valerie informs me you're about to become a father again. Congratulations."

"My instincts tell me it's a boy," says Stephen, leaning over the rail. "He's going to get a second candy cane at Christmas," asserts the bewildered pilgrim as, with a wan smile and a sudden flick of his wrist, he breaks his bondage to the future.

IF I DON'T ACT now, thinks Connie as he pivots toward Valerie Gallogher, I'll never find the courage again.

"Do we have a destination?" he asks. Like a bear preparing to ascend a tree, he hugs the font, pulling it against his chest.

"Only a purpose." Valerie sweeps her hand across the horizon. "We won't find any Edens out there, Father. The entire Baltimore Reef has become a wriggling mass of flesh, newborns stretching shore to shore." She removes her ovulation gauge and throws it over the side. "In the Minneapolis Keys, the Corps routinely casts homosexual men and menopausal women into the sea. On the California Archipelago, male parishioners receive periodic potency tests and — "

"The Atlanta Insularity?"

"A nightmare."

"Miami Isle?"

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"Forget it."

Connie lays the font atop the bulwark, then clambers onto the rail, straddling it like a child riding a see-saw. A loop of heavy-duty chain encircles the font, the steel links flashing in the rising sun. "Then what's our course?"

"East," says Valerie. "Toward Europe. What are you doing?"

"East," Connie echoes, tipping the font seaward. "Europe."

A muffled, liquid crash reverberates across the harbor. The font disappears, dragging the chain behind it.

"Father!"

Drawing in a deep breath, Connie studies the chain. The spiral of links unwinds quickly and smoothly, like a coiled rattlesnake striking its prey. The slack vanishes. Connie feels the iron shackle seize his ankle. He flips over. He falls.

"Bless these waters, O Lord, that they might grant this sinner the gift of life everlasting..."

"Father!"

He plunges into the harbor, penetrating its cold hard surface: an experience, he decides, not unlike throwing oneself through a plate glass window. The waters envelop him, filling his ears and stinging his eyes.

We welcome this sinner into the mystical body of Christ, and do mark him with the Sign of the Cross, Connie recites in his mind, reaching up and drawing the sacred plus sign on his forehead.

He exhales, bubble following bubble.

Cornelius Dennis Monaghan, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, he concludes, and as the black wind sweeps through his brain, sucking him toward immortality, he knows that he's never been happier.

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What is destiny and can we alter it? This question has run through much of Robert Reed's recent work. Of this latest foray into the realms of the imagination, Mr. Reed says: "Perhaps bits and pieces of the characters are pulled from my life. Or perhaps not. What is genuine is that years ago, a college friend invited me and another friend to do a little sailing on a hot summer day." And fortunately, he escaped to tell us...

The Gulf

By Robert Reed

I LIKE TO BELIEVE THAT I began as someone else.

But life has gradually remade me, as it does all of us. Reshaping my matrix. Remolding my pliable soul. Transforming my nature with minuscule touches and the rare little leap, improving as well as degrading those vital and subtle and basically immeasurable qualities that very much define what is *me*.

This happened to a stranger some thirty years ago.

He was brilliant and cocky — an extraordinarily loud undergraduate. A bad mix of traits, that. Give the prick any excuse, and he used to sing his own praises, telling everyone in earshot that here posed a full-blown genius. An intellectual titan. A lighthouse shining Truth across ignorant black seas. With embarrassing ease, he predicted great things for himself and anyone standing in his shadow. Proof of his brilliance was everywhere. His IQ scores. His easy good grades. The trademark audacity wearing its useful veneer of boyish charm. Plus a certain knack for impressing his otherwise tired and dispirited white-haired professors.

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Thirty years ago, this happened to me.

I was that bright abrasive prick. And my school was a little university that frankly lacked the prestige and professional heavyweights found in the best schools. Staring back across three increasingly fog-bound decades, trying to resurrect how I got to be where I was, I'm sure that I never gave Harvard or Stanford or MIT any real chance to claim me. And why? Because I secretly understood that I was nothing but a smart young man. Talented, but only to a point. Genius would see through my bluster, and the only way I could feel like the giant was to remain in a smaller, tamer pond.

I was an insufferable, incandescent pain in the ass.

And still am, if you happen to be listening to certain colleagues or lost friends or any of my several ex-wives.

But being an asshole has its benefits. In college and in life. For instance, it's quite amazing how certain women drift toward arrogant, self-assured men. In school, I always managed to keep one active girlfriend, and most of the time I was juggling them. And time was cheap: Studying was an occasional business; my body and young penis lived well enough without sleep. With scholarships and loans and assorted part-time jobs, I could afford to be generous with my social, hypersexed self.

During my junior year, I was the TA in a general physics lab.

In all, I slept with three of my prettier students. A leggy blonde for the fall term. A shorter, chestier blonde in early spring. And when her fiancé found out and made her break it off, I waited a respectful few weeks, then began trolling again.

One day, as I was trying to coax an out-of-date apparatus into doing its intended job, someone joked, "Maybe it isn't plugged in."

Looking across the black tabletop, I saw this girl that I must have spoken to on a dozen other occasions. But that time felt like the first time, somehow. She was pretty in a natural, just-rolled-out-of-bed way. Simple brown hair. A handsome, narrow, fit face. Good-sized breasts. But no real ass, which was different for me. Then and always, I appreciate a little swing in the walk.

I'll call her April.

Why that girl, I don't know. Maybe it was because she teased me, and people usually didn't. Maybe I just sensed something special. Most likely,

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it was because a button had worked loose on her blouse, and as she leaned forward, grinning, I was presented with the glorious view of a clean white bra and an ample breast trying to spill over the top.

She was flirting, I sensed. And I defended myself, remarking, "Theory's my strength. Not hardware."

She winked and said, "Good thing for you."

Then the professor drifted close, aiding with his hands, and our flirting quickly ground to a halt.

That night, I opened my copy of the campus directory. April was a senior — older than me by two years, since I'd skipped over the second grade — and she belonged to one of the better sororities. Contriving a teacherly reason to call her, I called. And after a little teacherly noise, I asked her out to dinner and a movie.

There was an unexpected pause.

Then she said, "Why not? It sounds nice."

And it was. Nice, I mean. We had a pleasant time of things. April was quieter than I.

Like most of the world is, frankly. And she was smarter than I'd expected. Except in science, and particularly physics. For her, my favorite science was a mystery wrapped in riddles. I tried to answer a riddle or two over spaghetti, and she seemed to follow the basic threads. I don't recall the movie. But as we left the theater, she brushed against me, and after all these years, I can still remember the sensation of that firm breast pressing against my happy tricep.

During the drive back to campus, April admitted that she was staying in town after school — another graduate hunting for direction. And after warning me that she had tons of studying to do over the next couple weeks, she kissed me on the mouth, for a little while, before vanishing into the big brick sorority.

We went out once again before finals. And kissed again. And I unbuttoned her blouse and got to play for a little while.

That summer, I rented an apartment off-campus, and work involved helping the head of the department with some of his trivial research. April got an efficiency some five blocks away, working long hours for a local Temp service, but when she had time enough and the energy, she would show up at my place for dinner and for sex.

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Somewhere in that routine, I fell in love with the woman.

Sort of.

I have to sound cynical or cold. Looking back, even my excellent memory can't recall what about her made me crazy. Made me lie awake nights thinking of her. Made her swim through my dreams when I could sleep, and monopolize my fantasies while I marched through my days.

In early July, she vanished.

Not unexpectedly. I knew she had interviews for faraway jobs. And there was an extended trip home. I've lost the details, but her excuses were reasonable and frustrating, and since I hadn't had my fill of the woman, her sudden absence made me sick.

I would drive past her apartment, by accident. Or I'd call at the oddest hours, ready to pretend that I was acting on a whim.

But for most of that month, she was gone.

And then she returned. As promised, I think. She came back to me with stories about her aging parents and possible careers in distant cities. We called out for pizza, and after coaxing and too much wine, she spent the night. But she made a point of cautioning me that she was anxious to get on her life.

"You mean eager," I warned her. "Anxious means that you're apprehensive. Scared, even."

She watched me. Her brown hair had been cut short for the interviews and tangled by me. The hair and my flattened pillow framed her pretty face, and her dark eyes seemed unusually deep and impenetrable.

"Anxious," I said, "means that you don't really want to."

And she nodded, smiling with a distant amusement, telling me, "I know what anxious means. And I'm plenty apprehensive, thank you. There's a lot in my life that I don't want to have change just now."

She was falling in love with me.

I could see it.

Despite April's thorough plans and her careful emotions, she found herself wondering how it would be to remain with me. Another year spent hovering around campus, waiting for her gifted young boyfriend to graduate. I could see it plainly. I could see what she wanted to admit, her mouth opening and closing again, her tongue nervously tracing the outlines of her narrow lips. Then she made her decision. She said nothing.

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She just sighed and smiled toward the ceiling, deciding that waiting for a better moment would be best.

Our next evening together, two or three or four nights later, April asked, "Do you remember that friend of mine? Gloria?"

One of her sister temps, I recalled.

"What about her?" I asked.

"Her dad keeps a boat on Two Timber Lake. A twenty-some foot sailboat. She invited us to go out on it this weekend."

I started to say, "Sure."

But April interrupted, adding, "If the weather cooperates."

"It will," I said. "I promise."

And she smiled, winking in my direction, and after finishing her wine, she winked again and looked past me, teasing with the button on her jeans while saying, "This should be fun."

GLORIA WASN'T her name, either.

What I remember is a smallish girl, flat-chested and narrow-hipped, black hair cut to be boring and a personality rooted in some deep, perpetual insecurity. A pleasant enough person, in her fashion. But definitely a sidekick. A shadow. That quiet wisp who stands outside the conversation, smiling when she thinks that smiles are expected, secretly wishing either for the will to join in or the honesty to slip away.

What I remember about meeting Gloria is nothing. I know that it was a Saturday afternoon in late July. I assume that we exchanged little pleasantries, and I probably insisted that we hug. I usually do. But whatever was said between us, like so much of existence, has been lost. The sound and heat of our voices had only one lasting effect — contributing to the general entropy of the universe.

I drove us to the lake. And I do remember some debate about the station playing on my radio. April touched my shoulder, asking if she could pick the music today, and she turned to one of those cutting-edge pop stations where angry women and depressed men screamed about good heroin and bad love. It was a thirty-minute drive, and I was a saint, tolerating that noise for most of the way. But modern music has always left me sick, frankly. What I prefer is the sweated elegance of Bach, the

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effervescent genius of Mozart. Which is why I abruptly punched us back to public radio, preempting complaints by pointing out, "We're halfway, and it's my turn to choose."

And I laughed. Just to show that I was a good sport.

Two Timber Lake was a flood control project, born shallow and growing shallower every year as silt flowed in from upstream. Its earthen dam stretched south to north for better than two miles, and the highway ran on top of the dam, greenish-brown water lapping against a riprap of gray limestone boulders.

Even for early August, it was hot and fantastically humid. The misery index was so high that few people were using the lake. Mostly optimistic fishermen with cold beer. The north beach, built from sand imported at great expense, was the private domain of several hundred shit-squirting geese. The marina was tucked into an adjacent bay. The floating docks were crowded with elaborate cabin cruisers and sleek speedboats and the archaic profiles of sailboats. I nearly leaped from the car, I was that eager. April said, "Wait," and fell in beside me, slowing me, holding my hand as we followed Gloria onto the longest dock.

Her sailboat looked a little small next to its neighbors. A little clunkier than I'd imagined, and older, and named for Gloria's mother, if I recall. Although I can't remember the old woman's name.

I'd sailed exactly twice in my life. And not since I was a kid. But like any excited kid, I had to jump onboard first, circumnavigating the deck before I helped get us ready. The cabin door was a sliding piece of plywood. Gloria opened its padlock and stowed both door and lock below. The cabin was a single room, stale and brutally hot, with a tiny kitchen and a minuscule head. Padded benches were set against every wall, forming a narrow Omega. "She sleeps six," Gloria mentioned. Then halfway laughing, she added, "But we'd have to be an awfully friendly six."

April asked, "What first?"

"Well, I don't want to go out with the sails," Gloria admitted. "I'm not that good." She pulled aside one of the cracked vinyl pads, and, reaching into the cubbyhole, began wrestling with a small outboard motor.

I brought the heavy red gas tank.

We clamped the motor to a weathered board on the stern, and we fueled it, spilling enough gasoline to cover the lake with rainbows. Then

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Gloria sent us off to do the various jobs that every sailor does before setting to sea. The mainsail and jib had to be untied and the bungee cords stowed below deck. A mossy wooden rudder and a battered tiller had to be slipped into place and secured with cotter pins. Nylon lines had to be checked; all seemed frayed but still alive. And in the time it took to make ready, a hazy clear day had grown cloudier, and a furnace-like wind was roaring out of the south. I heard a radio playing on a neighboring boat. A newsy voice was talking, but over the wind, I couldn't make sense of what I was hearing.

We seemed infinitely ready.

Gloria told us to be ready to cast off, and she primed the outboard and grabbed its little rubber handle and yanked, and yanked, and yanked again. I was standing by the bow, ready to untie us and leap onboard. But after a few minutes of little adjustments and decreasingly vigorous yanks, Gloria looked at me and said, "April says you're smart. Can you make this work?"

Smart is many things. Machinery is rarely impressed with my mind. But I traded places with her anyway, gave the primer a hopeful push, then pulled the cord with a manly vigor, accomplishing just as much as Gloria had.

When I smelled gas, I shouted, "Flooded!"

The lake was covered with a molecule-deep sheen of unleaded. And I was panting, asking, "Can't we just lift the sails and go?"

But Gloria was worried about her father's boat and skeptical of her own skills. She squinted into the gusting wind, suggesting, "We could wait. For the gas to clear." Then she gestured at the parking lot and the hill beyond, adding, "That's a nice enough restaurant up there. We could wait, in the air conditioning."

So that's what we did.

I probably ordered a Pepsi and something greasy. Something that I wouldn't dare eat today. What I'm sure of is that we had the restaurant pretty much to ourselves, since it was mid-afternoon and the weather was miserable, and a radio or television was playing back in the kitchen, another newsy voice talking too softly to be heard.

We waited for our pop and grease. April held my hand under the table. And sitting across from us, feeling desperate to break the lovers' silence,

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Gloria mentioned, "You're good at science, I guess. April says she can't understand half what you tell her."

I gave a little laugh, then corrected her. "She understands plenty. After all, she's got an excellent teacher."

April gave me a level stare.

I was still feeling bruised by my failure with the outboard. Seeing an opening, I leaned toward little Gloria, winked, and asked, "Do you know what I know better than almost anyone else in the world?"

She blinked.

Warily, she squeaked, "What?"

I leaned back and grinned, then boasted, "I know quantum mechanics."

She absorbed the boast. Or tried to ignore it. Either way, she suddenly couldn't take her wide eyes off me.

And that's when I launched into one of my standard lectures about the universe and electrons and the bizarre nature of Nature. I assured them that everything about the universe only seems solid and real. Every tiny action and every perfect particle can be described only with a beautiful and ethereal mathematics. Our waitress returned with our food, and I charmed a pen from her, then drew electron clouds and nuclei on a napkin. Then I crisply and efficiently described the venerable EPR Paradox: A particle decays, sending two photons in opposite directions. The spin of those photons remains wonderfully undefined until one or the other is observed. But when that observation is made — after a journey of two meters or two billion light-years — the sister photon knows it instantly. If one photon spins one way, the other suddenly spins the other. Momentum is conserved. Across the farthest reaches of the universe, a perfect balance is always maintained.

"Isn't that sweet?" I gushed.

Gloria wore an unnerved, somewhat awestruck expression. But if she made any comment, I can't bring it to mind now.

Eating, I slipped into some of the wilder notions in modern physics. Teleportation. The Many-Worlds Hypothesis. I even mentioned the wanky idea that the human mind acts as a kind of quantum computer, allowing its ghostly electrons to exist in a multitude of parallel universes, our every decision arising out of a grand consensus...and April interrupted,

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asking, "Which one's Penrose? Is he that poor man in the wheelchair?"

It was a joke. Surely.

But my laugh didn't sound convinced, or amused.

Gloria was staring out the window. And with a quiet voice, she remarked, "It's sure getting dark out there."

It was halfway to night, I realized.

With a tight little smile, April reminded me, "You promised good weather."

Gloria must have been thinking of her father's toy. "We should close things up again," she muttered. "Before it rains."

April thought that was a good idea.

So I helped pay and gulped down my drink. From the kitchen, I heard noise about unstable air and a thunderstorm watch. Yet when I stepped outside, the day suddenly brightened considerably.

The restaurant's windows were heavily tinted, I realized. Secretly embarrassed by my misinterpretation.

All of us had a little giggle.

Then I said, "It isn't that bad, is it?" Then sun actually came out again, and I looked into a new wind, strong and from the west, adding, "How about it? Out into the water for a quick once-around?"

THE OUTBOARD still refused to help us. But with the west wind in our faces and no boat traffic in our path, sailing away from the dock seemed manageable. Gloria had her crew lift and secure the mainsail, then the smaller jib. Then we untied the boat and pushed hard and leaped onboard, and Gloria used the heavy tiller to turn us enough for the tall white mainsail to take hold of the wind.

The boat moved smoothly, without haste.

In a minute or two, we were on the open water, and after another two minutes, we had escaped the little bay, entering the wide and shallow main body of the lake. The wind gusted and taut sails made their delicious flap-flapping sounds. Miles of water surrounded us, and the only other boat was a catamaran. A pair of boyish young men came flying past us, wearing long shorts and rippling muscles and broad, carefree smiles. One of them waved at my women friends. The other pulled in the main sheet,

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lifting one of the pontoons out of the rippling waves. With their friction reduced, they shot across the surface. Beside us. Past us. And in the next moment, vanishing into the glare and dirty foam.

April climbed up on the bow, opening her shirt, exposing a sweet little bikini top that I still remember. I can see her sitting with her bare tanned legs crossed, grinning and infectiously happy. Then she glanced back at us, shouting, "I could get used to this."

Gloria laughed, and laughed.

I was holding the main sheet. Gloria watched the sails and shoreline, and she called out when she was going to come about. I started to explain how sails work. They were wings, in essence. "A very elegant system," I assured. Then I lifted my hand, busy making an illustration out of it, and Gloria touched my forearm, asking, "Did you hear that?"

I stopped talking, listening to the wind.

"Hear...what...?"

Then, yes. In the distance. A soft but insistent booming sound.

The sky was growing darker again. What had been clouds mixed with sun became thick clouds pushing against each other, rolling in from the north and west, fed by the titanic energies of sunlight and heat and angry water.

I resisted the temptation to lecture about rainstorms.

April scrambled back toward us, shouting, "Shouldn't we get back?"

There was no reason to worry. We had plenty of wind. And plenty of time, judging by the distant thunder. For the next few minutes, nobody talked about anything except the boat and wind, and there was an unwritten law that every statement, no matter how trivial, was accompanied by some optimistic sound.

"We're almost there," we kept telling each other.

Believing it, I'm sure.

We reached the north bay without the tiniest adventure. Maneuvering into the wind ate time, but I still couldn't imagine anything but our safe, uneventful berthing. We had come about for the last time and were making our final approach when the wind, acting out of some abrupt maliciousness, stopped blowing, and the lake responded by instantly turning to a silty glass, smooth and fantastically placid. I looked at the

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outboard motor with frustration and a sudden irrational anger. But there still wasn't any problem. Our boat was halfway streamlined, and she had momentum to spare. We stood together on the stern, measuring our relentless progress. Then April made a little sound. A squeak, almost. I noticed what looked like a cloud of black smoke pushing its way over the hill to the northwest, and watching the cloud's progress, I asked myself how anything could be so low and moving so fast when the air around us was as still as the dead.

Even then, we should have made it back.

I could see the splinters in the dock. We were that close. But then one of the big cabin cruisers gave an important roar and pulled away from its berth, its wily captain deciding to take his chances on the open water.

The asshole passed between us and safety.

His massive craft had a heavy, sloppy wake that our boat had to roll over, losing most of what remained of her momentum.

But we kept drifting, moving gradually closer.

Desperate to do anything, I climbed up on the bow, grabbing the white nylon rope and judging distance to the end of the dock. Then I glanced back at the two women, watching them talk to each other, sharing their encouragement. Nothing left for me. April had left her shirt unbuttoned. Nervous, her nipples stood erect. She saw me watching and smiled fondly, and she tipped her head and said something to her friend, and something about her expression or the thick hard nipples made me think that I had to be in love with her, because I didn't want to be anywhere in the world but safe in bed, with her.

Once more, I looked ahead, ready to jump.

But our boat was nearly dead in the water. With maybe twenty feet to cross, we didn't have the strength. I remember standing tall, a part of me actually considering the prospect of leaping into the warm brown water and swimming, holding the line in my teeth like some daredevil, towing us across that last little way.

Then came a solid, deafening *boom* of thunder.

And a new wind fell from the northwest, stinking of cold rain and fresh ozone, blowing hard in an instant, and an instant later, sweeping that angry black cloud across the suddenly jagged face of the lake.

* * *

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The first raindrops were enormous and icy, and few.

But just when I could hope this was just one of those loud dry summer cells that blows past after a couple minutes, the cold rain soaked my clothes and hair and the screaming wind tried to fling me overboard, then swirled and dropped me back into the stern.

Gloria wore a stunned, embarrassed look.

April asked her twice, at least, what we should do. She put hands on her shoulders, screaming, "What do we need to do?"

The girl opened her mouth, and hesitated.

Then she found her voice, shouting, "The mainsail," almost too softly to be heard. "If we drop it, I can take us in on the jib."

To this day, I have no idea if that was sound advice, or pure foolishness. But it was something that I could do immediately. The little bay had turned to a dirty gray froth, and with cold rain lashing at my skin, I felt alert, and pissed. I crawled back up toward the bow with the wind kicking me from one side, then the other. Gloria was fighting to hold our bow toward the storm. To save our sails. But the shifting gusts kept trying to turn the boat. Stooping under the boom, I managed to reach the mast, and with both hands, I grabbed one of the two ropes wrapped figure-eight around matching aluminum brackets.

I yanked. And again, harder.

It was like trying to pull rope out of hardened concrete. The pressure on the sails was relentless. I didn't have a prayer, and hugging the mast with one arm, I waved, and screamed, and tried to look perfectly helpless.

April was helping Gloria hold the tiller. She saw me and shouted something at her friend, and the wisp of a girl said something, and April left her, scrambling over the cabin to me. Together we grabbed the rope and pulled and cursed, and pulled, twenty or thirty impossibly slow seconds invested in finally loosening the damned rope.

We gave out a big celebratory shout.

Then the jib sail — the wrong sail — unceremoniously collapsed on our heads.

The folded fabric instantly caught the wind, partway inflating, and the roaring wet air took the sail sideways, with us, and I grabbed the low railing before I went off the side, kicking at the sail and pissed and terrified, furious with myself for forgetting which sail was which.

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Gloria was doing a half-stand, waving with one hand, and the big sailboat was turning fast now, nothing about it clunky or slow.

April? Where was she?

Swept overboard, I guessed. But as the horror struck me, she reappeared, crawling up from under the jib with her hair plastered to her scalp and her opened shirt flapping like a third sail and one hand, then the other, reaching out for anything to hold onto as she began crawling back into the stern.

I followed her. To Gloria.

"We've got to! Drop! The mainsail!"

Our captain looked small and fierce now. Still inadequate, yes. But only because this storm would leave anyone looking that way.

"The rope's too tight," I confessed. "We can't — !"

"We'll cut it!" April promised. Then, "Where's a knife?"

"Kitchen?" Gloria replied.

April dove belowdeck, opened a tiny cupboard and spilled a tray of hand-me-down silverware on the stairs, and she grabbed a steak knife and came up looking at both of us. Gloria was still fighting to keep our bow into the wind. I remember thinking that I didn't want to climb back up on top again. I just couldn't. Then Gloria touched my arm and held tight, and shouting in a voice that I could barely make out, she told me, "Go below! Get the life jackets! Under the seat!"

I had a job. A mission. I couldn't have felt more relieved.

April climbed toward the bow. I stumbled into the cabin, into that pool of calm dry air, then began throwing cushions off the seats, looking into cubbyholes one at a time. What sounded simple turned into its own little nightmare. I couldn't find anything that resembled a life jacket. There were plastic dinner plates and rolled up sleeping bags and a soccer ball and goggles and snorkels and a single lost tennis shoe. Halfway around the cabin, I gave up, coming back to the doorway long enough to shout, "Where?"

Gloria said something. Said something and pointed.

And I went below again, flinging away the last cushions, the promised life jackets laughing at me from the final cubbyhole.

They were small and worn, their orange fabric fading to piss.

I handed Gloria her jacket before I looked up. April was sawing away

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at the taut rope, clinging to the mast with her bare legs and free arm. I'd just started to shout and wave, hoping she'd come for her jacket, and the line parted and the big aluminum boom fell with the wet sail collapsing on top of it. Then the swirling wind inflated both sails and yanked the boom sideways, and our bow followed, boat and Gloria having no choice but to let the next wild gust shove us across the open water.

She screamed for April.

I screamed.

We couldn't see any trace of her. She'd been swept over this time, I was sure, and I felt sick and lost and cowardly, even when some selfish piece of me was glad that I wasn't the one who was swimming.

But as before, I was wrong.

Because a bare arm pushed its way out from under the flapping mainsail, followed by April. She even managed to halfway stand, flinging the knife overboard before kneeling again and grabbing the boom, climbing along it without a shred of grace or the smallest whiff of bravery.

"God," she muttered, tumbling down to us. "Oh, God!"

"I'm sorry, sorry!" Gloria wailed. "My fault...everything is...!"

Then April said something, just to her, and Gloria seemed to nod, then told both of us, "Sit. Get the jackets on. Please!"

By then, we were flying across the water.

There weren't any landmarks. Looking forward or backward, I couldn't see any shoreline that I knew or that I didn't know. Both sails kept inflating, and the wind seemed to strengthen again, and I was sitting on the built-in bench next to April, the shoving wind at our backs, cold hands clinging to the gunwales, eyes straight ahead now, noticing an odd geometric regularity — a long horizontal line — emerging from the blackness.

I nudged April. Pointed, shouted.

Gloria was sitting next to April. She bent back and looked over us, and with a wasted hopefulness said, "The dock again! We're almost there!"

It wasn't, and we weren't.

But I was helpless, having no choice but to believe that we were going to get some second chance now. Even when I knew the winds were wrong. Even when that flat *something* was too high off the water to be any dock. I kept finding this prickly little optimism inside me. Right up to the

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moment when I happened to look over my shoulder, watching in astonishment as a tilted orange buoy streaked past us.

But the buoy was anchored, of course.

We were the ones moving.

I remembered.

Then the pounding rain let up just enough, showing us that the looming flat surface was covered with boulders, and I screamed at Gloria, "Come about!" I said, "That's the dam! We've got to come about!"

She seemed to hesitate.

I was ready to pull the tiller from her hands. A little mutiny.

But then she gave it a shove and our clumsy quick boat managed to change directions, the boom flew over our heads and the sail dragged after it, and we climbed to the opposite benches and sat and held tight, instantly regaining our lost speed. We slipped past a second orange buoy, missing it by nothing, and the women stared at the apparition with the same expression that I must have worn.

Stunned, wild astonishment.

In a universe drenched with massless light and instantaneous quantum events, we were streaking along at our own considerable speed.

A ROUTINE, PAINFUL and cold, claimed us.

We would blindly follow one accidental course until some ragged shoreline or the riprapped dam threatened to claim us. Then Gloria would use her entire body to push the tiller, and I'd wrestle with the boom, and we would scramble to the opposite side of the boat as we came about. Better each time, I'd like to think. Smoother and easier, and better.

Somewhere in the middle of the lake, the storm, and my numbed recollections, April screamed a question. I heard the question mark, not the words. But Gloria understood her, and she looked across the torn black water, then shouted to her friend, "I don't know! What it is!"

What was what?

I tried to follow their lines of sight, squinting and seeing nothing but a seething bleak grayness. And then, color. Motion. A rectangular sense of order that lasted for an instant, then narrowed again, and vanished, before whatever it was suddenly returned to being a rectangle.

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"What?" each of us asked.

Then lightning poured over our heads, and after an instant of wondering if our mast would catch the lightning, I realized that I could see farther now. And better. And the mysterious rectangle was transformed into parallel blue bars with a pole stuck between.

"It's that other boat!" Gloria screamed.

"The catamaran," I muttered, in horror.

There was no trace of the chiseled crew. The abandoned vessel was walking across the lake. The mast and shredded sail would catch the wind and fall over, and the pontoons would rise up. Then the boat would turtle for a few moments, hanging upside down until waves or a lashing gust lifted the windward pontoon again, the wind flipping the mast skyward again, that eerie circle complete.

A stunned sorry quiet held us by the throats.

Again, the wind found new strength and rage. Again, the world shrank to a screeching little circle of gray, and our boat suddenly tried to flip over on top of us. Our tall mast was nearly horizontal, bending like a fishing pole, and it dove into the waves and pushed deep, and we found ourselves standing, feet set on the opposite gunwales, our heads and shoulders rearing back as far as possible, out of instinct, helping our invisible, blessed keel.

Finally, the keel's weight won out.

We slowly lifted to a steep, endurable pitch.

A long low shoreline emerged from the maelstrom. We came about again. I held the boom until we were settled, then I flung it away and grabbed the gunwales. April was talking. In a private little scream, she was giving Gloria encouragement. Praise. Nothing was her fault, April promised. This was just how things worked out....

I stopped listening, my thoughts contracting into my own narrow world.

My arms ached. I was colder than I'd ever been. And worst of all, a powerful boredom was undercutting everything, including my will to live. For a long moment, I contemplated abandoning the boat. If I could leap far enough and not get tangled in the various tangled lines, I could float in the summer-warmed lake water, kicking lazily and depending on my jacket's buoyancy until my feet found some muddy shore.

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Except the life jacket was worn, soaked through, and designed to fit a ten-year-old. And when I bent low and shouted my idea to the others, I was met by lost looks, then April putting her mouth to my ear, remarking, "She can't swim! Not well enough!"

In this weather, who could?

But I didn't say what I was thinking. Secretly, I was wondering what I could say that would make April jump with me, leaving Gloria on her own.

We came about again, and again.

A hundred times, maybe. When you can't measure the passage of time, you can't count even simple things. It wouldn't have taken much to make me believe that we'd been slashing our way across the lake for a century. This was my entire life, my singular existence. It had always been, and everything else was fantasy, and this is where I would stay until the lake won, suffocating me.

Suddenly the wind weakened.

And instantly there came a brightness flooding through the air, sunlight fighting its way through heavy clouds.

Too soon, we celebrated.

I looked at April's eyes and Gloria's eyes and let them see the hopefulness in mine. Which was dangerous, I realized instantly. A blunder. Tricked, I let my body relax and my mind let go of its necessary terror. And then the sunlight was shut out again, and the rain came in fresh sheets, bolts of blue-hot lightning making the drenched air sputter and explode. Following the thunder was a huge burst of wind. Like a giant amoral hand, it slapped at our little vessel, and the flimsy long mast tilted until it dove beneath the surface, lake water pouring over the gunwales and around our feet and us rearing back again, fighting uselessly, everyone knowing that the boat would stop dead and turtle itself and we would be trapped beneath it and in the panic and confusion we would elbow each other and claw at the lines, fighting to hold our last breaths until the burning in our chests forced us to exhale, and drown.

Then for no particular reason, the wind softened.

And our boat, with a belly full of brown water and foam, found just enough strength to lift its mast again, righting itself with a clumsy majesty.

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The next gust would kill us.

I absorbed that insight calmly. Stoically. Even when the sky lightened again, I didn't believe anything but my own despair.

Glancing over a shoulder, I saw shreds of blue sky and a grassy green shoreline decorated with little trees bending low in the still furious wind, and big trees shattered at the trunk. A gulf of three decades lies between me and that moment, but I can still see those suffering trees and the sunlight in shifting columns, golden as it is in good poetry and bad, and a sudden gratefulness found me, and I let out an enormous shout.

In another few moments, the awful storm had passed.

In thirty seconds, Gloria and April had managed to turn us toward the shoreline, and I climbed up on the bow and leaped off into the soft stinking mud as we ran aground, and, trembling, I carried the bow line as far as it would reach, then simply dropped it.

The women jumped after me.

They were giggling. Dancing, nearly. And then staring at me, they put on expressions of amused horror.

"Your lips," said one.

"Purple," said the other.

I was that cold. Rain born near the stratosphere had lowered my core temperature, and my body shivered and hugged itself. Maybe for the only time in my life, I wished I was a female, coddled by that extra layer of sweet fat. More than anything, I needed to escape the chilling wind.

On cold clumsy legs, I ran uphill to an ugly public rest room, stepped inside and kept right on shivering. Eventually April came after me. She said something about them going to look for help. "Hurry," was my advice. To make heat, I began jumping in place. Whenever I thought of the lake or the storm, my shivering would worsen. Uncontrollable, terrifying shaking. And in the middle of that show, a young boy wandered in, and seeing a purple-lipped man wearing a kid's life jacket and leaping up and down in one place, he had the good sense to say nothing, backing out before I showed him anything even stranger.

Gloria and April found a retired couple whose RV had been parked in a sheltered place. April came back for me, and the three of us stripped and toweled dry and put on old spare clothes inside the RV's tiny bedroom. One at a time. And we thanked the couple profusely and drank buckets of

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lukewarm hot chocolate, and we explained what had happened, rehearsing our adventure for the first time, the old couple too polite to say what they were thinking: That we were idiots for trying to sail in this sort of weather.

Eventually we noticed that not only had the storm passed, but that late afternoon was bright and clear and wondrously calm.

A husky fisherman passing in a husky bass boat volunteered to tow our disheveled boat back to the docks.

April and Gloria stayed onboard, handling the tiller and the tow line.

I rode in the bass boat, monitoring the line at that end. After our elaborate, untraceable zigzag, we'd ended up on the south shore of the lake. We'd covered miles, surely. When I asked the fisherman how long the storm lasted, he glanced at his watch, then guessed thirty minutes. Maybe forty, if you counted the first and last raindrops. Was that all? I shook my head and asked about the winds. They had to have been hurricane-force, I mentioned. With a knowing shrug, he admitted that some gusts were probably seventy-plus. The worst of them were. Which wasn't as awful as I'd hoped to hear, frankly. So I tried to heighten my sense of accomplishment, mentioning the boys on the catamaran. What happened to poor them? And the fisherman chuckled and said, "Oh, they're well enough. I already talked to them. They beached before the crap hit. Like they should have. They just didn't tie things down right, and their toy got blown back out to sea."

If we spoke about anything else, I don't remember it. Mostly I just watched the tow line, and occasionally, I'd catch a glimpse of April and Gloria sitting together in the sailboat's stern, talking between themselves as both held the old tiller.

The storm had shoved the docks around, but the damage didn't look too severe. We tied up and Gloria gave the fisherman ten bucks for his trouble, then we worked on the sailboat until Gloria felt ready to leave it. I put the seat cushions back in place, and the outboard was stored again and the sails were tied down. Relocking the cabin door, Gloria promised herself that she would come out tomorrow, right after church, and clean up the rest of the mess. Before her father had a chance to see it.

April promised that she'd come out with her and help.

Driving us home, I made a point of turning the radio back to their

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favorite pop station. Because I was feeling so warm and glad about being alive.

But after a minute or two of raw noise, April turned it off, telling me, "Thanks. But I think we'd rather just listen to the road."

Pulling up in front of April's, I grinned and winked, saying, "I'm starved. How about some dinner?"

April was wearing an old man's spare clothes. A big shirt with its sleeves rolled up and a pair of loose, badly stained jeans. Yet she looked more beautiful, and more desirable, than ever. Mysterious brown eyes stared at my eyes, almost smiling. Then as Gloria climbed out of the back seat, April told me, "Later," with a certain tone.

"Later?" I said.

"Sure. Later."

I said my good-byes, got a quick kiss, and drove home.

Half an hour later and feeling starved, I called April. She didn't answer. So I invented an innocuous story that explained why she wasn't home, and I showered, and half an hour later, I called again. And again, nobody answered. So I put on my own clothes and walked the five blocks to her place. It was an old house. Her car was parked in the street. She lived on the second floor, in a tiny efficiency. I climbed the stairs and hit the door a couple times, then waited, hearing nothing. But it was a *nothing* filled with potential. Much like our entire universe is. So after waiting a little while longer, I went back down the creaking stairs and opened the front door and let it shut again. Then I crept upstairs on cat feet, scarcely breathing, sneaking up as close to her door as I dared.

I could hear them muttering quietly.

There was a tone of guilt.

A whispered joke.

Then, shame-tainted laughter.

Eventually another noise seeped through the apartment door, and in my mind, I saw exactly what was happening, and what must have been happening for a long while, and despite all of my ego and pride saying otherwise, I knew perfectly well that there wasn't any room for me on the other side of the door.

I crept downstairs again.

Slipped outside.

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It was a gorgeous evening, regardless. The sun was setting and the western sky was a spectacle of orange and salmon and gold, and the surface of every object, no matter how bland, prosaic and drab, glistened with a vividness that I had never seen before, or since. Every tree and house and street lamp and slab of concrete was laced with a calm magic, a spirit not just thick within them, but also plainly, achingly visible to me.

And thick within me, too.

I was weeping as I walked, sure. But I wasn't particularly unhappy, either. After everything, even emotional pain seemed like a gift. A blessing. Sacred, and worthy of being cherished by its grateful recipient.

People like to ask me, "Where did you dream it up? This theory of yours. This passage-of-souls business."

Somewhere between April's apartment and mine, genius happened.

One moment, I was thinking how I felt like a changed person. A wiser, older, better person, surely. And the very next instant, I questioned if this was really the same world that I was born into this morning. Or had the storm, with its wind and lightning and its torturing fear, carried me to a similar but distinctly altered Earth?

What if all life is that way? It isn't just the electrons in our heads that wander through the quantum sea, but it's our souls, too. They drift through an ocean of potential Earths, and people under stress, as I was that day, find themselves swept away on a slightly larger, grander voyage than most....

People ask me, "Where?"

Typically, I don't give them anything so vivid as the truth.

But it was somewhere between her apartment and mine. Closer to mine than hers, I'm mostly certain. And nearly twenty years later, when my colleagues and I finally invented a proper mathematics to describe this fantastic business, my own first calculation involved mapping how far I had likely traveled during that summer storm.

If Creation is a respectable ocean, I moved the length of a single water molecule.

Which is a very long ways, indeed.

Three years ago, I shared the Nobel Prize with three authentic geniuses. Two I worked with and depended upon, and a third, a genuine

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savant, who had published a very similar theory that he'd built entirely on his own.

This autumn, I visited my old school.

I was the returning hero, naturally. Small colleges don't get many Nobel laureates, and it has to make the most of each one of us. I wore the honor with a practiced ease, naturally. I told old school stories at a special banquet. As a favor to the President, I twisted the arms of the richer alumni. As a favor to my old department, I gave a dry long lecture to the physicists and hope-to-be's who were gathered together in the crowded and humid lecture hall. And as a favor to everyone, I stayed charming for the entire weekend, and sober enough on the scale of modern manners.

Oh, and by the way.

I saw her at the banquet. From a distance.

She'd always struck me as someone who would age well. And she had. Softer and grayer, but no middle-aged thickness yet. Even across a large room, I recognized her face and her body, and how she sat with her shoulders level and her back straight, and how she held her glass, too. And staring at that apparition, I found myself thinking, of all things, that I honestly couldn't remember any genuine reason why she had generated anything special inside me.

The woman sitting beside her wasn't Gloria. Too large in the chest and the hips. Too young by twenty years, at least. And prettier than just about anyone else in that enormous, overcrowded room.

Later that night, the pretty woman wasn't with her.

Some awestruck faculty members took me out to their favorite drinking hole. The same bar we used in my time; the only cheap beer within staggering distance of campus. We walked in together, and I saw April sitting alone at the bar, and after making some inadequate excuse, I took the stool next to her and smiled and said, "This is later. I guess."

She stared at me, her face surprisingly calm.

Empty, almost.

"You said 'later,'" I explained. "The last time we talked."

Without embarrassment, she said, "I tried to call you. And I came to your door — "

"Five times, I think. At least while I was home."

"Were you?" she asked.

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"I'd already figured things out for myself."

She seemed a little bit uncomfortable, which made me happy. But after a long sip of beer, she gathered herself, then mentioned, "I never did leave this town."

The alumni handbook had already told me as much.

But instead of admitting any interest, I just shrugged and said, "Oh, yeah?"

She watched me. Smiling, but not smiling, either.

I ordered my own beer and glanced over my shoulder. The professors had claimed a long table, and they were plainly impatient, the end seat reserved for their honored guest.

"It seems you were right about a lot of things," she told me.

"Name something else."

"You promised you were going to be important. For instance." She finished her beer and licked her upper lip dry, then with a tone that I never anticipated, she asked, "Do you think it will work? That machine they're building at Stanford?"

I must have seemed puzzled.

"The Guppy," she told me. Then, "You *have* heard about it. Haven't you?"

"Absolutely," I growled.

What my colleagues and I proved is that the sentient mind isn't just a quantum computer; it also possesses its own quantum vagueness. Each of us drifts among trillions upon trillions of basically identical earths. It's a relentless, mostly invisible process. But following a sudden stress, the mind perceives minuscule changes. Like the soldier who returns from war to find that his home doesn't feel quite the same. That things are not quite right. Family and friends have the correct names and faces, and his boyhood room remains just as he left it. But the poor fellow has migrated a fraction of a micron, and what he feels is that disruption inside his very soul.

The Guppy is a special chamber. A human will be sealed inside, then subjected to a variety of highly structured, incredibly complex pulses. In simple terms, the mind's electrons will be fooled. And like a tiny fish, that mind will travel a full fat centimeter across the Quantum Sea. Hundreds of times farther than any human travels in any lifetime. Far enough that

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the mind will find itself on an Earth with millions of changes that can be seen, and measured, and recorded for the benefit of High Science.

The best guess is that if The Guppy works, the human subject will find himself sitting in an identical chamber in a slightly different Stanford campus.

And we, meaning the researchers watching events from here, will find ourselves hosting someone who is almost identical to our brave volunteer.

"Are you working on that project?" she asked.

"I visit. On occasion. And they usually give me some sort of tour."

Worry weakened her smile.

"You probably don't remember. But I'm not much with hardware," I admitted. "And this is very much a hardware sort of project."

"But do you have any pull with them?"

Finally, I realized what she was saying.

Shaking my head, I said, "Sorry. I honestly can't help you."

Her shoulders dropped, a vulnerability taking hold.

"So tell me why?" I had to say. "Why would you want to leave this world? Are things that bad for you?"

"According to you," she replied, "we're always leaving anyway."

I didn't say anything.

"According to your theory, we're just souls drifting around inside some endless ocean of possibility."

"That's the simple version. Yes."

She nodded, waiting for the will to get up and leave me.

So I just said it. "I thought I loved you once," I muttered. "But you loved her instead. And in the end, neither of us got what we wanted."

Now she found the will, the strength, hands on the bar as she eased herself to her feet. She was a practiced drunk, standing with a sloppy grace.

With a dry quiet voice, she told me, "Gloria died."

"What?" I sputtered.

"Eight years ago. She was driving to work. She was late and ran a stop light, and a delivery truck collided with her." April said the words while looking past me, wiping one eye with the back of her hand. "That's what happened to her. To us."

Shit.

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Then she looked at me with an odd half-grin, remarking, "But it was worth asking, I thought. About volunteering."

What could I say?

"Sorry," I tried.

"Sorry about what?" she growled. "There are plenty of earths where I'm the one who gets to ride your machine. Isn't that right? And there's trillions more where Gloria's still alive. And who knows how many where she and I drowned out on Two Timber Lake, together. And on all those other possible earths, what? What? On most of them, according to you, we aren't even dreamed of. Isn't that what it boils down to?"

I whispered, "Yes."

April was weeping. She was leaning against the bar, wiping at the tears that kept streaming down her face.

Again, I said, "I'm sorry."

Then she straightened up and dried her face one last time, and glancing over at my table, she said, "Your friends are waiting for you. Go on."

"Sorry," I whispered.

"Go away."

So I left her. For the second time in my life, I didn't have any choice. But as I approached my table, watching those adoring faces smiling at a great man, it occurred to me that none of us ever really wanders blind in this sea. What lures us across the darkest, coldest gulf was suddenly obvious. And with that, I smiled too, and sat, and let this little earth warm me for the moment with its charms....

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Lewis Shiner is the author of five novels, including Slam, Glimpses, *and* Say Goodbye, *all of which are due to be reprinted soon in trade paperback editions. His last story for us, "Lizard Men of Los Angeles" in our July 1999 issue, was an old-fashioned tale of wonders and thrills. His new one is a very different beast indeed, a work of speculative fiction that seems particularly relevant to today's world.*

Primes

By Lewis Shiner

1.

FOR NEARLY AN HOUR NICK had been stuck on Interstate 40, surrounded by the worst traffic he'd ever seen. He'd watched the last heat of the sun set fire to the horizon and burn out, and now the first stars were tunneling through the haze. He had one arm out the open window in the unnatural 60-degree heat of the desiccated January evening. In the better parts of his brain, to keep himself amused, he was revising the code for his new graphics driver project.

Once past the Durham Freeway, I-40 had narrowed to a two-lane bottleneck. Traffic seemed to have doubled since that morning, with two cars trying to squeeze onto the road for every one that crawled off in defeat.

He was wearing a black T-shirt from the 544 club in New Orleans, where he and Angela had danced on their honeymoon two years before. A huge diesel rig inched past him on the right. The trailer was stark white

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except for the rear panel, where the number 544 stood out in stark black numerals. Nick glanced down at the dashboard clock. It was 5:44. For an instant he felt an abyss of inexplicability open under him, and then he shook it off. It was a bizarre coincidence, nothing more, something to tell Angela about, if he ever made it home.

By six he was close enough to the Lake Jordan exit that he could pull onto the shoulder and ease around the motionless right hand lane. It took fifteen minutes more to cover the remaining mile and a half to his driveway, and by then he was too tired to think much about the Cadillac parked where Angela's gold Acura should have been. Her battery had been acting up, he knew, and she'd probably gotten a ride home with somebody from Duke Hospital, where she was on the faculty.

In truth, for most of that particular day, Nick had been consciously happy. Despite the endless commute, despite approaching deadlines on his driver, the components of his life were laid out in what seemed a comfortable and sustainable order. He and Angela had no debts except the house, and they'd nearly paid that off. They'd both weathered the latest flu epidemic and were back to full health. And Thursday was Nick's night to cook. His attention was already shifting from traffic and programming to the free-range chicken and sour cream and tortillas waiting in the refrigerator to be transformed into *enchiladas suizas*.

The fear didn't fully hit him until he climbed out of the truck and saw the color of the door that he was about to slam shut.

His beautiful white pickup truck was bright red, red as a stoplight, red as blood.

He'd been driving that pickup for four years, from the time before he'd moved to North Carolina and met and married Angela. He'd bought it back in Austin, where a white paint job could make the difference of a few crucial degrees in the inside temperature under the Texas sun. It had been white when he'd gotten into it in the office parking lot at a quarter to five. He knew himself to be sober, drug-free, and possessed of a clean bill of psychiatric health. It was simply not possible that the truck was red.

He tried to remember if he'd noticed the hood of the truck while he was driving home. It had been dark and he hadn't been paying attention. He looked at the key in his hand. It was the wrong size and shape and there were no other keys with it. His hand lunged reflexively for his pocket and

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found nothing there. All of his pockets were empty: no wallet, no checkbook, no change.

He searched the red truck. It too was empty except for a jack behind the seat and an owner's manual in the glove compartment. It could be a rental, he thought. Maybe he'd been in an accident that damaged his short-term memory, and nobody had realized it. Maybe he'd absentmindedly left his wallet somewhere.

He started to run for the house, his shoes slapping awkwardly at the sidewalk. The front door was locked and he pounded on it with the flat of his hand until he heard the lock click and felt the door swing inward.

The man who opened it was in his thirties, tall and fit looking, with an angular face and fair receding hair. He wore a long-sleeved blue oxford-cloth shirt, crisply pressed khakis, tasseled loafers. He had a drink in his left hand. He looked Nick over and stepped aside to let him in. "Angela?" the man said, looking behind him, "I believe Nick has arrived."

The accent, as Nick knew it would be, was cultivated British. Nick had seen the man's photo in one of Angela's albums that dated back to before Nick's time with her. His name, Nick knew, was David. He was Angela's first husband, and he'd died in 1995.

2.

"David Graham," David said, extending his hand. "I expect you're a little surprised to see me here."

"I thought you were dead," Nick told him, looking down to find he'd gripped David's hand by sheer reflex.

"Ah. Angela said much the same thing."

Nick backed into the living room and sat on the couch to ease the trembling in his legs. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm afraid I live here, actually."

Angela appeared in the doorway that led into the kitchen and leaned against the jamb, arms folded. She was still in her hospital scrubs and Nick couldn't help noticing, as he always did, how that shade of green set off the red-gold in her hair. A little mascara and eyebrow pencil would have made her conventionally beautiful, but she disdained makeup and so instead her appeal was more subtle. It had taken Nick all of a minute and a half — the

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interval between the first time he met her and the first time he managed to make her laugh — to be overwhelmed by it.

Nick tried and failed to read her mood through the barricade of her posture. David, on the other hand, was as transparent as glass. He looked at Angela with wonder, longing, and a fading glow of residual despair.

"Is anybody going to tell me what the hell is going on here?" Nick heard his voice go shrill in the particular way that inspired him to self-loathing.

"It's not just here," Angela said. "It's all over the news."

"So you just, what, came home, saw David, and turned on CNN for an explanation?" In fact it wouldn't have surprised him. She found her stability in the calm urgency of the newscasters, in the way they stood between mere mortals and the avalanche of information that threatened to bury all of civilization.

"I got home at four-thirty. About an hour later I went out to get something from my car and it was gone, and there was some strange car in the driveway instead. I got freaked and came in and tried to call the police, but all the lines were tied up. That's when David walked in on me." She stopped for a second, and Nick could see her fast-forward through her emotions. "At that point we knew something big was happening." She turned away. "Come on in and see."

Nick followed them meekly into the den and sat on the sofa between them. He was just in time for a recap of the day's top story.

Between five and six in the afternoon, eastern time, the population of the east coast of North America had doubled, as had the population of the western bulge of South America, which lay along the same longitude. The phenomenon seemed to be spreading westward at the same rate the Earth revolved.

Nick understood that what he was hearing was true, believed it on a cellular level, but he couldn't find a handle for his emotions. The scale of the disaster seemed to overshadow his own confusion and panic.

"I've checked the other stations," Angela said, answering a question he hadn't needed to ask. "If it's a hoax, they're all in on it."

"It's not a hoax," Nick said. He glanced at David. "You know it's not a hoax."

"With some significant exceptions," said CNN anchor Judy Woodruff,

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"every human being in the affected area — which now includes Chicago, Memphis, and the eastern edge of New Orleans — now seems to have an exact double." The camera panned to a duplicate Judy Woodruff in a canvas chair at the edge of the set, patting nervously at her shoulder-length blonde hair.

The scene shifted to Bernard Shaw interviewing his double on a Washington, D.C. street corner that was sliding into chaos. In the background, abandoned cars stood with their doors open as pedestrians swarmed without apparent purpose between them. Half of the people in the crowd had twins standing somewhere near them. What struck Nick was that not all the pairs wore the same clothes, and some had radically different outfits or hair styles. The picture jumped periodically as someone from the alarmed, but not yet hysterical, mob collided with the camera operator.

"So what are these 'significant exceptions' she was talking about?" Nick asked Angela. "Is that us? And where did David come from?"

"David lives here," David said.

"They don't know yet," Angela said. "Shhhhh."

The street scene ended abruptly, and during a second or so of on-screen darkness Nick heard the ambient noise of an impending press conference: chairs shifting, throats clearing. "We're live," somebody said, and then the screen cleared to show a generic wood-grain folding table under harsh fluorescent lights. Two identical men sat at the table, each with long dark hair and a single diamond stud in his left ear. A young woman reporter Nick didn't recognize said, "We're here at MIT with the Doctors Jason Berlin of the theoretical physics department. Gentlemen, I understand you have a theory to explain the bizarre events we've seen tonight."

"Merely a hypothesis," said the Dr. Berlin on Nick's left. "Have you ever heard of something called the 'Many Worlds' interpretation of quantum physics?"

"I'm not sure," the reporter said. "Was it ever on *Star Trek*?"

"Frequently, as a matter of fact," said the Dr. Berlin on the right. "It's a sort of thought experiment that postulates an infinite number of universes parallel to our own, in which all possibilities are real."

The other Dr. Berlin nodded. "Exactly. And every possibility splits off

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a new world. For instance, you might have a world where the Axis Powers won the Second World War. Or where Fidel Castro played major league baseball."

The reporter said, "What does that have to do with what we're seeing tonight?"

The first doctor leaned forward. "Picture our Earth, and then a second Earth that's almost identical, but not quite. Call it, I don't know, call it Earth Prime. In one of them Bill Clinton is President, in the other it's Dan Quayle."

"Dan Quayle?" Nick asked. "Is he kidding?"

Angela shushed him again.

"There'll be other differences," the second doctor said. "Some people will have died in one world and not in the other. Two otherwise identical people will have different jobs, different spouses. Now suppose these two universes, that had split off at some point in the past, merged together again."

"How could that happen?" the reporter asked.

"I have no idea. Maybe the universe is downsizing." The crowd, which had been buzzing with low conversation, now erupted in nervous laughter. "But you'd see what we're seeing — most people would be duplicated, though with all kinds of subtle variations."

"Why isn't it happening all at once?" the reporter asked. "Why only people? Why no trees or cats or skyscrapers?"

The first doctor shrugged and the second said, "Frankly, we're at a bit of a loss to explain that just yet."

"Back to you, Judy," the reporter said. "Or is that Judy Prime?"

Angela hit the mute button and sat for a moment, as if gathering herself. Then she looked past Nick to David and said, "Tell me. How did I die?"

3.

David got up and refilled his glass from the liquor cabinet under the TV. Then he sat down again and said, "Car crash. The brakes were bad on the Mazda, and you insisted on going out in the rain to rent a film. We had a bit of a row about it, actually, and I only gave in because I felt like I was

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coming down with something and I wasn't up to getting wet. You...you slid through a stop sign." He took a drink. "A sixteen-year-old girl hit you broadside. They pronounced you dead at the scene."

"In my world," Angela said, "you went out for the movie. A movie you didn't even want."

The rising tide of emotion threatened to wash Nick out to sea. "Excuse me," he said, and went to the kitchen.

There he discovered that the refrigerator was wrong. No orange juice, no 7-Up, no raw materials for enchiladas. Instead he found two six packs of Heineken, a pizza box, some leftover Chinese takeout, a few half-pint bottles of Perrier. Over the hum of the refrigerator he heard David, his voice choked with emotion, say, "My life ended that night."

Nick closed the refrigerator and stared at his reflection in the window above the kitchen sink. "'My life ended that night,'" he mouthed, and watched himself mime putting a finger down his throat. Then he washed his face in the sink, trying to scrub away the fear and jealousy and despair.

As he turned from the sink, looking for someplace to throw his paper towels, he saw that morning's *News and Observer* on the butcher block table. The headline read, "Quayle apologizes for State of Union blunder."

"Oh my God," Nick said.

It was not, then, a merger of two worlds. It was a hostile takeover where one world vanished and one remained. The trees and cats and skyscrapers the reporter had been talking about belonged to someone other than Nick. David was not the intruder; like he'd been saying all along, David lived here.

Nick looked at Angela where she sat in highly charged conversation with David on the couch and did the math. Angela was not an intruder here either, world of origin notwithstanding. There was only one person who didn't fit in the equation, and Nick had been staring at his reflection only moments before.

5.

Nick had caught Angela on the rebound, and he knew he'd never have had a chance with her otherwise. He'd still been in Austin when David died, still been married to his first wife, still involved in an affair that was

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about to turn publicly sour in a narrow circle of acquaintance. He was writing code then for a small software house called Computics and thinking more and more about North Carolina.

Computics had a customer named Richard who sold medical information systems in the Raleigh area. On a business trip in 1995 Richard had shown Nick around the Triangle and Nick had been impressed with how green everything was, how it rained even in August. Summer rain in Texas was only a distant memory. When everything fell apart in Austin the next year — divorce, threats of more layoffs at Computics, another summer of rationed water and parched brown lawns — Nick packed it in and headed east. Richard helped him find a job and an apartment, and at his New Year's party four months later he introduced Nick to Angela.

Nick was graceful for a man his size, and he'd taken the trouble to dress well that night: charcoal suit, silk tie, cufflinks. Somehow he summoned the nerve to ask Angela to dance. She'd been drinking for the first time since David's funeral that June and it was the champagne that said yes.

A year and a half into the marriage Nick insisted on therapy, where Angela complained that Nick was too much in control, that he wanted her but didn't need her, that he didn't truly need anyone. In the third week she admitted that she loved Nick, but not in the way she'd loved David. She was afraid to love anyone that much again.

Nick slept in the guest house for a month or so after that, wanting to leave but imprisoned by his desire for her. Finally that desire became stronger than his anger and they began to make love again. He moved back into the bedroom and their attempt at therapy became, like David, one more thing they didn't discuss. Life was good again, or at least comfortable, until one day he came home and his pickup was red and David was waiting for him in the living room.

7.

David fixed mushroom omelets and they ate on TV trays in the den. Nick suppressed the thought that this was how the world ended, with neither bang nor whimper, but with CNN analyzing it to death.

After dinner Nick did the dishes and then took the portable phone

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into the darkened formal living room. The lines were jammed, but after half an hour he managed to reach his mother in San Antonio. She was fine, she said, but this duplicate version of herself kept following her around and talking incessantly. Nick nodded silently; his father was dead, then, in this world too. His mother supposed she would just have to put up with the inconvenience. Then the duplicate got on the phone and seemed unable to understand why he wasn't calling from Austin.

After he hung up he sat in the darkness for a long time. Eventually he switched the phone on again, and after a dozen attempts got through to directory assistance. He tried Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill without finding a listing for his name. He tried again in Austin and this time the computer-generated voice recited a phone number — not his old one, but an exchange that Nick recognized as West Lake Hills, a big step up from his old neighborhood east of I-35.

That knowledge made it even harder to call. He could hear a voice saying, "I wondered when I'd hear from you," a tired and put-upon voice that Nick suddenly realized was that of his father, the fat, balding, sweaty and selfish man Nick had spent his whole life trying not to turn into.

If it had been the other way around, if Nick had been flush and his other self in Austin broke and desperate, Nick would have reached out to him in a heartbeat. But this way, to have to call from a position of weakness, even with no intent of asking for help, was more than he could bring himself to do.

He put the phone down, an immense sense of loss flowering slowly in his mind. He went out the sliding glass door at the back of the kitchen and crossed the patio to the guest apartment, a free-standing building that in Texas he would have called an *abuelita*, a grandmother's house. It was unlocked. He switched on the light to face what his logical mind had assured him he would find there: all of his books gone, all his vinyl albums and CDs, the bookshelves he'd put together and stained by hand, the Heathkit amp he'd built in college, his Math Cup from high school, all gone.

David's guest house instead contained a chair, a double bed with a white chambray spread and no headboard, a pair of framed Impressionist prints on the walls. A green banker's lamp bowed over the night stand, resting on top of a 1997 almanac and a John Grisham novel.

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Nick sat on the bed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the room hadn't changed. It was full of absence. No favorite T-shirts, no photos of old girlfriends, no plastic model of the Space Shuttle from eighth grade. Every physical object that meant anything to him was gone.

11.

By the time Nick got back to the den, the many-worlds theory of the Doctors Berlin had expanded to fill the gap left by any other rational explanation. CNN now referred to the crisis as the "Prime Event" and their art department had produced a graphic showing twin Earths just touching edges inside an infinity symbol.

At seven p.m. eastern time, CNN estimated the population of Mexico City at 60 million, a figure Nick could not meaningfully comprehend. Much of the city was on fire by 8:00 and the smoke, on top of the already lethal pollution, quickly sent population estimates downward. The sidewalks were choked with corpses of the very young and very old, and the reporters began to speak in hushed voices about typhus and cholera.

Despite warnings, L.A. drivers began to head out into the worst traffic jam in California history. Meanwhile, gang members cruised the fringes of enemy turf, waiting to mow down newly arrived doubles of rival gang members as they appeared. "Too many f*cking Crips already, man," a young Blood told reporters, his "fuck" censored by a faint beep. "I ain't sharing with no f*cking Primes."

Airline traffic had come to a complete halt as nearly empty planes disappeared from airport gates and hangars, only to land minutes later fully laden with Primes. There were no rental cars, hotel rooms, or clean public rest rooms to be found in North America. Restaurants were out of food, service stations out of gas, ATMs out of money.

Eight o'clock Thursday night in Durham was 3 A.M. Friday in Moscow and along the Palestinian border; 5 A.M. in Sarajevo; ten in the morning in Beijing. Around the world everyone was poised for 5 P.M. ethnic cleansing time, taking an example from the L.A. gangs, or more likely not needing one.

At nine Angela switched to a local channel and learned that banks were limiting withdrawals to $100 per day per account, and holding all checks until the federal government told them exactly what their exposure was.

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Meanwhile local police departments asked all off-duty officers — prime or otherwise — to show up for night duty at banks, groceries, convenience stores, malls, and emergency rooms.

At ten o'clock Nick stood up. "Look, I can't just sit here and watch this anymore."

Angela stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "This is only the most devastating event since, what, the extinction of the dinosaurs?"

"At least the dinosaurs didn't sit around watching comet reports on CNN," Nick said. "I can't do anything about what's happening, and I can't just sit here and passively soak up any more second-hand pain and suffering. I'm full up."

Nick saw he was keeping Angela from the next round of disasters. He turned to David and said, "I know I don't have any right to ask this...."

"Of course you'll stay here," David said. "Take the guest house for as long as you need. I should think you already know where everything is."

"Yes. Thank you." The less charitable part of Nick's personality knew David wouldn't think of turning them out, not while Angela was part of the equation.

He picked up a handful of newspapers and magazines in the living room and went back outside.

13.

He was exhausted, and he badly wanted Angela to find him asleep if she did happen to look in. Two troubled marriages had taught him that sleeping well could indeed be the best revenge, but that night his twitchy nerves made it hopeless. After half an hour of flinging himself from one side of the bed to the other he switched on the banker's lamp and reached for the almanac.

He verified that Dan Quayle was President, impossible as it had seemed at first. In this universe — David's World, as he'd come to think of it, not without bitterness — Clinton had been caught *en flagrante* two days before the 1992 election and the press had crucified him. Bush had not only won, but solidified a new era of conservatism. Quayle rode the rising backlash against affirmative action, foreigners, feminism, and welfare straight into the White House.

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What surprised Nick was how little difference it had made in the end. *Time* magazine featured Saddam, Tony Blair, and Nelson Mandela cheek to jowl with faces Nick had never seen before: a Father Dominguez who was leading an armed insurrection in the Yucatan; Selma Jones, U.S. ambassador to China, who was urging favored nation status for the totalitarian regime; Davy Davis, teen heartthrob, who had the Ricky Nelson role in the upcoming feature film version of *Ozzie and Harriet*. But for all he knew, Selma Jones had been ambassador to China in his world as well, and Nick had never kept up with matinee idols.

The thing that really seized his attention was a three-page spread on the man who'd just been anointed the richest in the world: Harvey Chambers, CEO of the Computics empire headquartered in Austin, Texas.

Nick, like everyone else in the business, had many times heard the story of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center and the point-and-click interface they'd invented for one of their pipe-dream projects. In Nick's World, Steve Jobs saw a demo and went home to build the first Macintosh. Bill Gates saw the Mac, and then there was Windows.

In David's World Harvey Chambers saw the demo first. He was a comics fan, so instead of windows his operating system had "panels," and instead of dialog boxes it had "captions" and "balloons." Parents didn't get it, but kids did, and the first computer-savvy generation grew up on Computics. Chambers avoided Apple's fatal error and licensed out his hardware designs to third party vendors, concentrating his own efforts on software — first games, then study aids, then office suites, growing up with his customers. Jobs and Gates never had a chance.

Like Gates in the world Nick came from, Chambers was locked in a battle with the Department of Justice. With a Republican that Chambers had helped elect in the White House, presiding over a Republican Congress, Justice never had a chance.

In Nick's World, Computics had never pioneered anything. Chambers had sold the struggling company in the late eighties and retired to Mexico to do some serious drinking. The people who'd known him said he'd had too much ambition and too little luck, a combination they thought would kill him in the end.

Nick's rich double in Austin no doubt worked for this gleaming,

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world-beating Computics, pickup long ago traded for a hunter green sport utility, the *Wall Street Journal* delivered every morning so he could check his stocks as he sat in his overstuffed leather armchair, careful to avoid wrinkling his Brooks Brothers suit. It was a scab Nick should have been able to pick at successfully for quite a while, but instead his attention kept drifting to more fundamental questions.

Like how he was going to live, for one. Angela would have work — it didn't take a Nostradamus to predict a shortage of doctors. The computer industry, however, looked like it could be in a serious recession as people concentrated on the basics of food, shelter, and transportation. All the things Nick no longer had.

The thought of the Angela-shaped hole in this world brought him to the toughest question of all. He and Angela. Angela and David.

He woke at some point before dawn with Angela curled into his back, holding him. The knowledge of something terribly wrong nagged at his memory, just within reach, but he shied away from it and dove back into sleep.

17.

David was the perfect gentleman. He made breakfast for Nick in the morning while Angela slept in, and gave him a robe to put on after his shower. He even found a couple of old T-shirts and a pair of sweat pants that Nick was able to fit into. While Nick tried to wake up, David went about his business, making reassuring noises on the phone to his most important clients without communicating any real data. He seemed to function in some gray area between the law and finance, and Nick was content not to know any more than that. "It's too early to tell," David said into the phone, to one client after another. "We'll just have to see how this all falls out."

On the news that morning they had an explanation, of sorts, for the red pickup. The two Doctors Berlin, now instant celebrities, were explaining the situation in terms of conservation of angular momentum (the primes who appeared in cars or planes were already moving at a high rate of speed) and conservation of mass and energy in a closed system (twice as many people, but only the same number of cars, planes, bicycles, and

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so on]. Anyone who'd been driving at the time of the Prime Event had ended up in a car from David's World that wasn't in use at the time. Cars had disappeared from dealerships and rental agencies and even locked garages, then turned up on the highway with people like Nick behind the wheel.

"Improbable as this sounds," one of the doctors said on the TV in the next room, "there's a precedent for matter relocating itself like this. All the way back in 1964, Bell's Theorem projected this kind of behavior from subatomic particles into the macrocosmic world."

Meanwhile, repo agents were already out in force, and the reporters expected steady growth in that sector of the economy for at least the next few weeks.

The news didn't help the clenched feeling in the pit of Nick's stomach. He watched Angela stumble in and sit at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and knew he had to get moving. If he went back to bed and pulled the covers over his head like he wanted to, he might never come out. The next time David was between calls, Nick said, "I'm going in to work."

"Why?" Angela said.

"Because I have to at least try. I can't just keep sitting here."

"Be careful," David said. "They say traffic is even worse today than last night."

Nick bent over to kiss Angela good-bye and she turned away at the last second, putting one arm around his neck and squeezing briefly. Her self-consciousness was palpable and Nick attributed it to David being there in the room, watching. Nothing had happened between Angela and David yet, Nick was sure, but he knew he was an idiot to walk out and leave them alone there together.

Nonetheless he turned away and started toward the door, and David followed him. "Listen," David said, and Nick turned to see him holding out two twenty-dollar bills. "Think of it as a loan, if you must. You can't go out there with empty pockets."

He was right, of course. Nick had no idea how much gas there was in the truck, and he had nothing to take for lunch. "Thanks," he said, the word leaving a numb spot on his tongue.

He turned the red pickup around and waited at the head of the

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driveway until, with a resigned nod and a flick of the hand, a middle-aged man finally let him join the slow parade of cars. On the commercial stations the drive-to-work crews hashed over the news with morbid humor, inviting people to call in with their most humiliating prime story. Nick escaped to a university station playing Mozart.

What most surprised him were the numbers of people on foot. Most were men, some with their thumbs out, some just walking with their heads down, postures closed against the morning chill. There was menace in the hard metal of the other cars, and Nick kept turning the radio down because he thought he heard something: a collision, a scream.

Just before the 54/55 exit, he saw a late model Honda and a Ford Explorer pulled over on the shoulder and two men, one black, one white, shoving and grabbing at each other beside the cars. As Nick slowly rolled past he could see the tight, weary expressions on their faces. Two miles later he saw a squad car stopped on the westbound side, and a cop forcing someone face down onto the hood.

For minutes at a time, one or another of the walking men would keep pace with Nick's truck as it inched forward. Once Nick turned his head and found one of the men staring in at him through the passenger window. The man's gaze was flat, empty of emotion. As if, Nick thought, the absence of hope had stranded him in an eternal present, without envy or expectation. Nick averted his eyes, his desire to offer a ride utterly quashed by the images of violence he'd seen throughout the long night on the television screen, and by the ugliness he'd already witnessed that morning through the windscreen of his truck.

He made it to the office in just under two hours. The front desk was deserted when he first walked in, then John, the slight, middle-aged receptionist, ducked out of the conference room and looked at him blankly. "Can I...help you with something?"

"Is Lisa in?" Lisa was the owner, and Richard had introduced her to Nick on his first trip to North Carolina. There was a chance she might remember him.

"Everyone's in a company meeting now," he said.

"Is this about the prime business? Because until yesterday I worked here. Your name is John Fanthorpe and your father was a logger in Oregon. Lisa's kids are named Spike and Janet. The alarm on the back door goes off

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every morning at 8:31 and nobody will drink the coffee when Dave Lee makes it."

John thought it over while Nick counted silently to five. "You might as well come in," he said at last.

Nick stood against one wall and scanned the room. He knew all but two of the fifty or so people there. Almost all of them were sitting in pairs, and some of the ones from Nick's world met his eyes and nodded. Both Dave Lees, Nick noticed, had on identical black jeans, black running shoes, and black 3dfx T-shirts.

One Lisa sat in the audience. The other Lisa stood at the front of the room and said, "You have to keep in mind that we're a small company, and a lot of federal guidelines don't apply here. Hell, you know as well as I do there aren't any federal regulations to cover this kind of mess. So what it comes down to is, I'm going to do whatever I think is best for the company, because in the long run that's going to do the most good for the greatest number of you all.

"I've got to sit down and crunch some numbers and make some decisions. So what I want everybody to do is to go on home." There were groans from the audience. "I know, it took you hours to get here. But you should all be home with your families right now. I will call each and every one of you before five o'clock today, Bell South and GTE willing, so that means any of you primes that aren't staying with your originals, come up here and give me a number where I can get hold of you."

Nick had heard the TV reporters distinguish between "primes" and "originals" but it sounded different when it was his job on the line. It sounded like there was no point in signing up.

"That's it," Lisa said. "Everybody go home, try and be cool, wait for this thing to shake itself out. I'm not even going to ask for questions because there aren't enough answers to go around right now."

Hands went up anyway and one or two people started sentences with "What about..."

Lisa shook her head decisively. "I'm serious, people. I'll talk to you all one-on-one later today." She held up one placating hand and left the room.

Nick forced himself to get in line and put his name and David's phone number on the legal pad. The Lisa who'd been sitting in the audience came

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up behind him. "Hey, Nick. I looked over the employee list and didn't see your name."

"Apparently I'm still in Texas," Nick told her. Lisa had been all right for an owner. She didn't pretend to be one of the gang, but she didn't distance herself either. Her office door was open most of the time, which meant on bad days Nick had been able to hear her yelling into the phone all the way back to his office. She was about fifty, with purplish-black skin and the first traces of gray in her short, stiff hair.

"Uh oh," she said sympathetically.

"Yeah. Kind of takes a bite out of my seniority."

"You want some coffee or anything? It's not bad, Dave Lee didn't make it."

"No thanks. I got a long drive coming up."

They sat on two of the folding chairs and Lisa said, "I'll tell you what. I don't think seniority or equal opportunity or even friendship is going to matter much. I know what I'd do in her place. If I could have two Dave Lees and lose a few entry-level programmers to do it, I wouldn't hesitate. Especially since I could probably get the second Dave dirt cheap."

"And let's face it, who would know better than you what she'd do?"

"Indeed."

"So what happens to you?"

"Lisa's putting me and the kids up for the time being. My guess is she's going to offer me some kind of a buyout. The thing is, the old definitions of wealth are probably going to cease to matter much. Don't get me wrong — I'm sure the same people are going to be on top, probably by a greater margin than ever, but the units of measure are going to change. Nobody knows yet what that measure is going to be, but the more liquid it is, the more likely it is to carry the day. So if she offers me a big wad of stock, it's probably not going to hurt her much to do it. She can salve her conscience on the cheap, and I'll have to take it, because what choice do I have? Which means I have to find a way to turn that stock into something to eat and a place to sleep." She drained her coffee cup, which featured Gary Larson cartoon dinosaurs. "What about you?"

"My situation is a bit complicated. Angela's ex-husband is alive here and her double isn't. I think she's going to have to make a choice, and...let's just say my seniority isn't looking that good anywhere."

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"Maybe seniority won't matter there, either."

"Yeah. We can always hope, right?"

And hope did, in fact, die hard, Nick realized, as he found himself headed toward his old office as if he would find some trace of himself there. Instead he found a fierce-looking young woman with black hair and a thin face, staring at the computer screen and typing with blinding speed. She had her own posters on the wall, no plants, no stereo. There would be no email for Nick on her machine, no code for his new graphics driver.

On the way out he ran into Tom, his project leader. Tom was heavy and graying, with a bristling white mustache. He and Nick had been friends, but never particularly close.

"Hey, Nick," he said.

"Thereby identifying yourself," Nick said, "as the Prime Tom."

Tom nodded. "A bunch of us fifth wheels are talking about having a picnic tomorrow over at Lake Crabtree. Start around noon or so, go on all day. Everybody bring what they can. Maybe take our minds off things for a little while."

"I'll just have to see," Nick told him. "Tomorrow seems like a million years away right now."

19.

It took Nick less than an hour and a half to get back to Hope Valley Road. As he idled past the bank which no longer held any of his money, he watched a National Guardsman in full riot gear turn people away from the cash machine, which bore a hand-lettered sign reading "Out of Service."

"It's a fucking lie!" a woman was screaming. Tears were running down her face and she was waving her ATM card in the Guardsman's face. "There's nothing wrong with that machine except the greedy bastards who shut it down!" The Guardsman was faceless behind his Plexiglas mask, but Nick could read the nervousness in his posture.

Nick looked away. The two twenties in his pants pockets had a palpable weight. The urge to drive to Food Lion and squander the entire forty dollars on candy bars and balloons and toys almost overwhelmed him. Being an adult was more of a burden than he could carry. He wanted

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someone to take him by the hand and either beat hell out of him or tell him everything was going to be all right.

Instead he drove back to David's house and the chilly comfort of CNN.

On Headline News, the world's religious leaders stepped up for their share of the limelight. "If God had no hand in this," Pat Robertson asked, "then who put these drivers into automobiles to guard their safety? Who put these passengers into airplanes? Science can't explain what's happened to us in the last twenty-four hours. Life is a miracle, and we've just seen six billion miracles in a single day."

Anchor Lynne Russell noted, without comment, that the whereabouts of only one Pat Robertson was known. Whether the one who addressed the nation was original or prime was likewise a mystery.

Twin Dalai Lamas, from separate encampments, each declared the other to be but maya, illusion, a physical manifestation of earthly greed. The Pope, meanwhile, had gone into seclusion with his prime, intimating that they might be a while.

On the scientific side of the fence, the EPA issued a statement pointing out that the simple body heat of an additional six billion people, not to mention the carbon dioxide they exhaled, could escalate global warming catastrophically. One source speculated that the entire land surface of the planet could be desert within ten years.

The global population continued to drop rapidly, however. The combined overnight death toll from Bosnia, Khazakhstan, Jordan, Somalia, and Mexico was already estimated in the tens of millions, with no end in sight. Large portions of L.A., London, and Moscow were on fire, while Mexico City had burned out from lack of oxygen. Australia and New Zealand had both closed their borders, turning back all incoming sea and air traffic while ferrying foreign tourists out of both countries on nationalized Qantas planes.

President Quayle, not knowing what else to do with him, had appointed the Bill Clinton from Nick's world as Special Advisor on Prime Affairs. The "Affairs" part had commentators sniggering. The two emerged at 5:00 eastern time to announce the formation of the U.S. Peacekeeping Force, a new organization that would incorporate existing members of the Army, National Guard, and local police forces, plus anyone else who

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wanted to volunteer. The government promised all recruits three meals a day, a place to sleep, their nation's gratitude, and pay in the form of government scrip to be redeemed when the crisis was over.

"That's it," David said. "They just flushed the dollar down the loo."

At the inevitable press conference, with a freshly minted U.S.P.F. logo on a banner behind him, Quayle said, "The mission of this force is to protect private property, safeguard human life, and provide an orderly." He squinted at his TelePrompTer. "Transition."

"Property first, of course," David said, and Nick felt a surge of warmth toward him.

"Transition to what?" Angela asked.

"Martial law," Nick said. "God help us all."

Helicopter footage showed an unbroken line of the desperate and homeless that stretched from Mexico City to the Texas border — cars, bicycles, pedestrians, wagons, horses. Somebody had blown up the International Bridge at Laredo in the early morning hours. The U.S. Border Patrol blamed right-wing extremists and the Governor of Tamulipas blamed the U.S. Border Patrol. The loss of the bridge made no perceptible difference. The tidal wave of humanity rolled across the Rio Grande like it was a mud puddle, and refugees simply swarmed over the few cops who were willing to open fire.

"In Austin, Texas," Russell said, "billionaire Harvey Chambers has become a one-man Works Progress Administration." Nick had been drifting into his own alarming fantasies of Quayle's personal New World Order, but the mention of Austin brought him back. The screen showed what seemed to be thousands of workers outside a huge complex of steel and glass towers. As one crew cleared live oaks and mesquite bushes in a long straight line, a second crew came behind them, digging a shallow trench. In the background still more workers unloaded massive blocks of stone from flatbed trucks.

In the foreground, a young male reporter in khakis and a polo shirt turned to the camera and said, "Offering good pay, hot food, and accommodations at a Tent City of his own creation, Chambers has commissioned a large-scale building project on his Computics campus. Though Chambers hasn't released any details of what he's up to, it doesn't take one of his resident geniuses to make an informed guess. It looks to be a very

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high, very thick wall, and with the visitors headed his way from south of the border, he may need it."

An hour later, as Nick was washing the dinner dishes, the phone rang. David didn't answer so Nick let the machine take it. "This is a message for Nick," Lisa's voice said. "I'm sorry, but we're not going to be able to find a place for you. I'm sure you appreciate the situation." Nick could hear her relief that she didn't have to break the news to him directly. "If you haven't heard, though, the government is going to have jobs for anybody who needs one."

23.

Nick woke at seven the next morning, cranky and sullen. He'd been dreaming about deserts and sandstorms, and in the middle of it all a pyramid with Computics logos carved into its sides.

Angela murmured something unintelligible and turned her back to him as he got out of bed. He dressed and went over to the main house, shivering a little in the distinctly colder morning air. David was still not up, so Nick made coffee and brought in the paper. Enjoy this, he told himself. Solitude is now the most precious commodity on Earth.

The front page told him that the U.S.P.F. was an instant hit. The government, cleverly anticipating that they wouldn't have enough guns or uniforms to go around, had declared that volunteers were to provide their own uniforms of blue jeans and white shirts. Their commanders would issue them red bandannas. They were encouraged to bring along their own personal weapons.

In separate, but nearly identical statements, two Ralph Naders warned that there was little difference between the U.S.P.F. and licensed vigilantism. Any unstable person with a piece of red cloth and a gun could wreak unchallenged havoc. The reporter covering the story dismissed him as a harmless crank.

Saturday had always been Nick's favorite day of the week. Just seven days ago he'd cooked his strawberry mint crepes in his special pan and sat on the patio in the sun to eat them. This Saturday he spread the classifieds — reduced to eight pages from the usual two dozen — across the dining room table and looked for work.

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There were personal ads, mostly from primes looking for missing persons. Auto dealers were looking for temporary repossession specialists and drivers. And there was still plenty of work for telemarketers. The rest of world seemed to be holding its breath.

David eventually wandered in and logged on to his Internet provider so Nick could check job listings on the Web. The Web seemed largely unfazed by the Prime Event. And why not? Nick thought. There was no shortage of room in cyberspace. Ads for electronic stock trading services still popped up everywhere. On ZDNet, Jesse Berst — now with two photos of himself at the head of his column — asked his readers if it was the end of life as they knew it or simply the biggest stunt yet by Harvey Chambers and Computics to stall the Justice Department. The AltaVista search engine invited Nick to ask a question like, "Where did all these people come from?"

He found half a dozen openings for C++ developers in the area, though he suspected most of them were no longer viable. He switched over to the Computics Writer program, figured out the slightly cheesy interface, and put together a quick resume. If he had to fill out a job application, he wondered, would there be a box to check if you were a Prime?

By the time he'd emailed the copies of his resume it was after noon. Angela, puffy and uncommunicative, was watching CNN with David. Special Presidential Advisor Bill Clinton was addressing protesters at the Washington Mall. "I'm a Prime just as many of you are," he said. "I know your sense of dislocation and anxiety."

The crowd jeered and shouted insults.

Clinton raised his hands. "I urge you to return to your homes. This disruption is only delaying our efforts to bring help to those of you who need it the most." Clinton's words disappeared under a chorus of heckling, and finally he shrugged and walked away with his head down, surrounded by bodyguards in dark suits.

Voices began to chant, "No justice, no peace," over and over. Nick could hear growing alarm in the voices of the CNN reporters, and then, moments later, the crowd seemed to buck, like a single organism reacting to a shock. The camera swung wildly around to show a wedge of U.S.P.F. recruits in white shirts and red bandannas, swinging clubs and baseball bats and firing something into the air. The screen filled with smoke from

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pepper spray and tear gas, leaving sound as the only evidence of what was happening: screams, grunts, the sound of wood impacting flesh, the muted thunder of running feet. Nick, horrified, covered his ears and went into the bathroom, running water in the sink to mask the noise of the TV.

When he came out he had decided to go to the picnic at Lake Crabtree. He had real friends there, and friendship seemed less contingent than everything else in his life at that moment. He got all the way to the hall closet, looking for his softball and glove, before he remembered that he wouldn't find them there.

He stuck his head back into the den, where CNN had moved on to the next atrocity and David and Angela were in the midst of a heated discussion. "...has nothing of real value to back it up," David was saying. "There's no disincentive to inflation."

"Where have you been for the last thirty years?" Angela was leaning forward aggressively, but Nick could see she was enjoying herself. "Money isn't real. It's a necessary fiction that everybody's bought into for the sake of the game. There's nothing to back it up but good intentions anyway."

"There's your, what do you call it, Federal Reserve System."

"It's the Emperor's New Money, except the emperor is naked now. So people will transfer all their leftover hope and need to this government scrip. It's Tinkerbell money, but people will clap for it. Wait and see."

Why can't I look up from people being beaten and debate economic theory? Nick wondered. If I could have fought with her like that, over something other than wounded feelings, then maybe she could have loved me too.

"Listen," he said. "There's a company picnic thing at work, and I think I want to go." Too late, and with too little enthusiasm, he added, "You guys can come along if you like."

David looked at Angela, who was already shaking her head. "I'll pass," she said.

"I think there's some veggie dogs in the freezer," David said, "if you don't want to go empty handed."

29.

The crowding was less severe on I-40, but there was still insufficient room for Nick to shake off the restlessness that gripped him, to push the

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accelerator to the floor and watch the landscape come hurtling at him. He knew it was just another misguided impulse, like the one that had sent him to the closet for his baseball glove.

He got to Lake Crabtree by two and parked at the edge of the entrance road. Groups of families seemed to be living in the open-walled picnic structures and in camper trucks in the parking lots. Long lines waited outside both restrooms. It took Nick twenty minutes to find Tom and the others where they'd built a fire in the center of a soccer field and ringed it with Styrofoam coolers. The wall reminded Nick of Harvey Chambers's macroengineering in Austin, and that in turn reminded him of his dream.

Nick offered his veggie dogs and half a loaf of oat bread. "Is it okay to just build a fire like this?"

"You're kidding, right?" Tom said. "What exactly are you worried about? Pollution from the smoke? Using up precious natural resources? Park rangers busting us for not having a permit?" He waved an arm at the crowds that surrounded them. "All that stuff is over. Moot. Finito."

They sat down together and roasted a couple of hot dogs while Tom told his story. Everybody had a story now, though Nick considered his own rather pedestrian.

"I was working late," Tom said, "so I wasn't on the highway when it happened. Sometime before six I got up and went to the bathroom, and when I came back this other guy who looked just like me was sitting in my chair, typing on my computer. It was the single weirdest moment of my entire life. That feeling, to be looking at something for which you know there cannot ever be a rational explanation. I just turned around and went back into the hall and pictured that kid in the *Little Nemo* comic strip. You're too young to know what I'm talking about. Anyway, he had this hat with a sign on it that said 'Wake Up!' Flip, his name was. I tried everything I could think of to wake up — looking at my hands, pinching myself, holding my breath.

"About that time the two Lisas came by and rounded everybody up who was still in the building and took us into the conference room. We borrowed John's boom box and listened to the news, and of course once we understood what was happening we all wanted to go home, make sure our wives and husbands and kids were okay.

"There was only one car between me and the other Tom, and by this

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point we'd figured out whose world this was. I mean, he had the keys and my pockets were empty. So he gave me a ride home and put me and my Suzie up in his and his Suzie's guest room. I guess I can't really complain, but...you can't tell the difference between us by looking. Only I'm in the guest room and he's in the whole rest of the house. He drives and I have to ask if I can ride along. And he always makes me ask. He hasn't refused me anything, but he always makes me ask."

They both looked at the fire for a minute, and then Tom said, "Doesn't it bother you? Them calling us 'primes'?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're a math person, like me. What's the definition of a prime number?"

"Divisible only by one and itself."

"Doesn't that seem lonely to you? Do you remember what they call numbers that aren't one or a prime?"

Nick shrugged. "I forget."

"Composites. Because they're made up of other numbers. But the primes are all alone."

"Maybe they're just self-sufficient," Nick said, in an attempt to lighten him up.

"You think?" Tom asked, staring with an intensity that made Nick look away.

After another brief silence Tom said, "You know what's really weird? The other Tom, he doesn't have any trains." In Nick's world, Tom didn't actually have a guest room because it was completely given over to his model railroad. "When I asked him about it, it was the first time he showed any real interest in me. 'I always thought about doing that,' he says. 'I had this Lionel set I really loved when I was kid.' And I go, 'Yeah, I know. I was there.'

"But they're all gone, all those trains I put together by hand. The Texas Eagle. Southern Pacific Number One. Wiped out." He snapped his fingers. "Just like that. I mean, you have to wonder what exactly is the point, when you can lose everything, just like that."

Although sympathetic, Nick hadn't lost sight of the fact that he'd come to the park to get cheered up. He ate two hot dogs and drank a Coke, then extricated himself to join the softball game starting nearby. Other

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than having to play barehanded, it was the best he'd felt in two days, running, chasing fly balls, swinging a big stick at something.

Darkness ended the game by five o'clock, and even with the night turning rapidly cold, the beer started to flow. Nick was not much of a drinker, and without physical exertion to distract him his thoughts kept stumbling over Angela, Angela and David, alone together back at David's house.

"Hey," a voice yelled. "Anybody here speak Spanish?"

At the edge of the fire Nick saw John the receptionist next to a slight man in black jeans, denim jacket, and a battered straw cowboy hat.

Nick walked over. "A little," he told John, and nodded to the other man. "*¿Qué tal?*"

"*Es mi esposa,*" the stranger said. "*Ayudame, por favor.*"

"Okay," Nick said, and asked him what the trouble was with his wife.

"She's having a baby," the man said. "But it's too soon." His Spanish came fast and slurred, the way Nick was used to hearing it in Texas. "I need the hospital, but I can't take her because somebody stole my car."

Nick looked back at the fire, thought briefly about Angela again, and then remembered all the men he'd passed on the road in the last two days. Guilt welled up inside him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take you."

"*Gracias, muchas gracias. Dios te paje.*"

The man's gratitude made Nick even more uncomfortable. As they started across the field he said, "My name's Nick. Where are you from?"

"I'm Carlos." He shook Nick's hand. "I come from Vera Cruz, originally. Just now from San Antonio."

Nick said that he used to live in Austin.

"I know Austin," Carlos said. "There is supposed to be much work there." He was nervous and sweating, and it was getting very dark. Nick heard voices nearby and couldn't pinpoint where they came from. Suddenly he felt vulnerable and a little foolish.

"*Aquí es,*" Carlos said abruptly.

Someone shone a flashlight in Nick's eyes and he had to fight the urge to turn and run. After a few seconds his eyes cleared enough to see a middle-aged woman in a black mantilla sitting on the grass. A girl who didn't seem older than her late teens had her head on the woman's lap.

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Two or three other men, one of them now holding the flashlight on the girl, stood in the shadows.

Nick asked if she could walk.

"I don't know," Carlos said.

They were only a hundred yards or so from one of the parking lots. "I'll go get my truck," Nick said, realizing, once the words were out, that they might think he was running away. "Carlos, you want to come with me?"

Nick half-ran, half-walked toward the spot where he'd left his truck. Carlos jogged beside him, thanking him again. "It's the red one, there," Nick said, then pulled up short. A man in jeans and a white sweatshirt was sliding a flat piece of metal into the window on the driver's side.

"Hey," Nick said in English. "Hey, what're you doing?"

The man glanced at Nick with apparent disinterest and went back to work. In the glow of a nearby streetlight Nick could see the man's dirty blond hair and narrow eyes.

"That's my truck!" Nick said, his voice cracking as the humiliations of the last two days reached critical mass. He ran at the man, grabbing for the hand with the jimmy. The man spun away, leaving the jimmy in the truck door and pulling something out of his waistband.

It was a .38 revolver. For a second, as the muzzle swung in front of his face and the hole in the barrel filled the world, Nick considered that he was about to die. He reacted to the thought with sadness and a flash of self-pity.

"Correction, mother*fucker*," said the man with the gun. "According to the VIN, this here truck's the property of University Ford in Chapel Hill." There was something red around his neck. Nick realized that this was one of the new vigilantes, whatever it was they were calling themselves.

"Look," Nick said, "this man's wife is sick. We need to get her to the hospital."

"I don't see nobody." Nick looked back and saw that Carlos had disappeared. "Now," the man said, "you got the key to this thing?"

Nick could hear the pulse in his neck as his T-shirt scraped against it. It seemed oddly slow, but so was everything compared to the speed of his thoughts. He went through several possibilities before he finally said, "Yes."

"Hand that son of a bitch over."

Nick took the truck key out of his pocket. His hand trembled and he stood looking at it for what seemed like a long time.

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"You scared, motherfucker? You got every reason to be."

In fact Nick felt enraged and helpless, which was something altogether different. It made him want to cry. As he held out the key it shook loose from his fingers and clanged on the asphalt.

"You clumsy piece of shit! God dammit!" The man took one step back and waved the pistol toward the weeds by the side of the road. "Get over there and get on your God damn knees."

"No," Nick said, listening to his voice squirm out of control again. Self-loathing washed over him. "You've got the key, you've got the truck, you probably just killed that poor guy's wife and child. If that's not enough, go ahead and kill me too."

"You prime fuck. You think if I did kill you, anybody would give a God damn?" Nick saw then that the man was more afraid than Nick was, that Nick had caught him off guard by showing up so unexpectedly, that the man had failed to think through what it would mean to point his gun at someone. Nick still wanted to smash his ugly head with a baseball bat, but he no longer believed the man was ready to shoot him.

"You've got the truck," Nick said again, to remind the man that he had, after all, won. Then he turned and walked away, wondering if he'd misjudged and if the man would shoot him after all.

He walked into a clump of trees and pissed against one of them. It wasn't as private as he would have liked, but at that point he was beyond caring. It felt like hot blood draining out of him, and he was weak and shaky when he finished.

Carlos and the others were gone. Nick made a half-hearted attempt to look for them, then went back to the company fire. He thrust his hands nearly into the flames and there still was not enough heat to warm him.

Tom and Lisa materialized on either side of him. "Are you okay?" Lisa asked. "What happened?"

Nick could only shake his head. "What's going to become of us?"

31.

Lisa gave him a ride home. "It's only a couple hours out of my way," she said.

"He had a Palm Pilot," Nick said. He couldn't seem to stop rehashing

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the incident in his head. "I didn't really register that until just now. It was in a little holster thing on his belt. He was using it to run the Vehicle ID Numbers. Crackers with guns and hand-held computers."

"Now that's really scary," Lisa agreed.

"He called me a 'fucking prime.' No, wait. He said, 'you prime fuck.' There was this absolute hatred in his voice."

Lisa glanced at him just long enough to make him wish he'd kept his childlike discoveries to himself. "Yeah, okay," he said. "Nice weather we're having."

Lisa laughed. "Not for long. They say it may freeze tonight."

She let him out in his driveway and he walked around to the driver's side. "You want to come in or anything? David's being pretty accommodating, I'm sure he wouldn't mind my asking."

"It's late."

Nick nodded. "Thanks for the ride."

She put a hand lightly on his arm. "Take care of yourself, all right? Just take everything slow and easy. You'll be surprised what you can learn to live with."

She turned around in the driveway and Nick saw her hand come up over the roof of the car in a final salute before she pulled onto Hope Valley Road and was gone. Was that the goal, then? he wondered. To find out exactly how much he could in fact put up with? Until he too was shambling along the roadside on sheer inertia, eyes glazed, with nothing behind him and nothing in front of him?

The house was dark except for a single light over the kitchen counter. Nick stopped there to scrub his face with dishwashing liquid and water as hot as he could stand. His fingers still twitched slightly, as if he'd had too much coffee.

He went on through into the den. The TV was off for once and the house was deathly silent. Nick knew something was wrong, but he couldn't say what it was. The night's violence had left him thinking murder and mayhem, and that was the only reason he went into David's bedroom.

Before he could speak he heard the rustling of covers followed by Angela's voice saying, "Nick?"

He froze.

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"Oh my god," she said. "Oh my god. We fell asleep."

Nick switched on the light. Angela was holding the sheet up over her bare breasts. David was blinking, pushing himself up on one elbow.

Nick turned the light off again.

"Nick?" Angela said. "Nick, wait. Oh, Christ, Nick, I'm so sorry...."

What Nick really wanted was a long, hot shower. He knew, though, that it would be some time before he got one. "When you're dressed, David," he said, "I need to talk to you for a minute." He went back to the den and sat on the couch.

The two of them came out together a few seconds later. David was in pants and shirt, Angela in a terrycloth robe. Angela was crying silently.

"Just David," Nick said.

She looked at David, then at Nick, and thought better of whatever she'd been about to say. She went through the kitchen and the sliding glass doors to the guest house.

"I'll need a few things," Nick said. "Some sweat clothes, or some drawstring pants, maybe a jacket. Whatever you have that might fit me. A sleeping bag if you've got one."

"Look here, I'm really sorry about this. We didn't either of us mean for it to happen — "

"I don't want to talk about it. Could you see if you could find those clothes?"

David nodded and left the room. Nick leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He couldn't remember ever being so exhausted. Part of it, he knew, was the anticipation of fatigue to come.

"Nick?"

He started awake, amazed to realize that he'd actually drifted off for a few seconds. David was holding out a soft-side flight bag. Inside Nick found clothes, a tightly rolled sleeping bag, a Swiss Army knife, a couple of towels, a first-aid kit, some toilet paper. At the bottom was something metallic that Nick fished out and set on the couch beside him. It was a .22 target pistol.

David laughed nervously. "I expect some might think me a bit mad to offer you that in the circumstances. But I thought you might — "

"No, thanks," Nick said. "Just put it away somewhere, will you?"

David stashed it in one of the built-in drawers next to the TV, and

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when he came back he had money in his hand. "I've only got a couple of hundred here at the house. If you want to wait till tomorrow I could sort you out some more."

"No," Nick said. "This will do." The money only made Nick more resentful. The business with Angela was a separate issue, something he'd known would happen sooner or later. At that moment he hated David because David had everything to give and because Nick had nothing to do but take it. It made Nick careless of what David thought of him, made him greedy and arrogant and willing to push for more.

Instead he zipped the bag and stood up. Then he followed David's gaze and saw Angela in the kitchen doorway. Her cheeks were still wet. "You're not going...?" she said. "Please, please don't go. Wait until morning. Let us talk about it, at least."

"I'm just going over to Richard's house." David didn't flinch, willingly complicit in the lie. Nick felt the chill he'd known once when he'd cut himself badly in the kitchen. The knife had gone much too deeply into his flesh, but there was no true sensation at first. "I'll call you," he said, in a hurry to get outside before the pain hit.

"Be careful," Angela said, with a catch in her voice that Nick knew he would remember later.

He hefted the bag and walked outside.

37.

The night was clear and cold and he stopped to put on David's jacket. Once he got moving he was actually making better time than the cars on Hope Valley, and there was satisfaction in that. It took him only half an hour to get to I-40, where he turned right and headed west along the access road.

Fragments of his dream flashed through his mind, overlaying the reality of the stalled and abandoned cars beside the road, the smell of exhaust fumes, the trash tangled in the thick, brown grass of the hillsides. It was easy to imagine the drought never ending, the trees withering, falling, decaying into dust, while the privileged few huddled in their pyramids. But who would actually choose the desert, given the choice? Who would not walk, head down, putting one foot in front of the other, for hundreds and hundreds of miles toward whatever hope was left?

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He'd been walking for an hour when he heard voices speaking Spanish beside him. He looked up, in the space of a second imagining that it might be Carlos, somehow with his wife and a healthy, if slightly premature, baby, and that they would offer him a ride because he had at least tried to help.

Instead it was a battered pickup that coasted along beside him, three men in the cabin. They all wore baseball caps and work clothes. One of them saw Nick's searching look and nodded stiffly.

Nick nodded back and said, "*Buenas noches.*"

"*Buenas,*" the man said. "*¿Adónde vas?*"

"*Tejas,*" Nick said, giving in the Mexican pronunciation. "Austin."

"Us too," the man said in Spanish. "I hear there's much work there."

"It's true," Nick said, also in Spanish. "I saw it on the television."

Work, he thought, and more. For Nick it meant the only person in the world who would have to take him in, no matter what. Because how could you look into someone's face, knowing they were just the same as you, and turn them away?

The man smiled and jerked his head at the bed of the pickup truck, cluttered with tools and folded plastic and canvas tarps. "You want a ride?"

"*Gracias,*" Nick said. "*Muchas gracias.*"

The truck paused momentarily and Nick vaulted over the side. He propped his duffel against the back of the cab and in minutes he was asleep.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SCIENCE, SELF, AND THE SENSE OF GODHOOD

RELIGION manifests in myriad ways. The anthropologist Raymond Firth remarked, "savage religion is not so much thought out as danced out." This sentiment captures a great deal, if for "savage" we read "early." Quite probably that was how religion worked in the lives of our ancestors. Theology is theory; but in prehistory faith was surely rooted in experience. Joyous dancing transported minds to more exalted spaces.

Science fiction is the essence of the modern. It is our job as writers to see where our "encounter with the infinite" — an all-purpose phrase that embraces cosmology, evolution, and religion — may go, driven by the relentless hammer of science and its handmaiden, technology.

SO-SO BIOLOGY

Religious experience resonates in us. In pondering our innermost natures, faith is crucial. Why does it speak to us profoundly? Indeed, why has religion dominated so much of history, right up to the present?

From a purely cost-accounting point of view, it is pricey. The Bible tells of pagans sacrificing their prized cattle, and even their children, on bloody altars. Peasants living in rude shacks turned up to labor on pyramids, churches, mausoleums, and priestly comforts. Jews died rather than fight on holy days. Christian Scientists to this day deny medical care, persisting for their faith.

Polls plausibly report that a majority of us believe in some concept of God. Religion is a true

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cultural universal. Neanderthals left gifts with their carefully buried brethren, suggesting a concept of an afterlife, though we will never know for sure. In our supposedly scientific era, New Age bookshops and evangelical churches report great growth. Do such numbers imply a positive gain from the religious experience? Such a strongly felt need suggests a benefit from faith.

I am a scientist and a science fiction writer, accustomed to asking uncomfortable questions. My first instinct is to look at the most controversial wing of current science, sociobiology. Its critics might term it "so-so biology," for it can run to Just So stories describing how any particular trait might have come about.

Let us begin with a skeptical accounting. Of what *evolutionary* use is belief in God?

Crude analogies to animal behavior abound. Wolves gnaw off a foot to escape traps, a form of sacrifice. Primates invest heavily in a hierarchy, with alpha males performing roles we could parallel with priestly ones. These do not remotely prove a genetic basis for religion. After all, beyond genes and even culture there lie the constraints of the world itself. We need not wonder that universally people prefer lush fields to barren deserts, or abodes with a view to dank hollows. Could religion be an ornate response to environment?

Surely our persistent awe at the world's beauties could drive a reverence for the implied Creator of it all. We expect to see agency everywhere, and our elaborate ability to ascribe cause and effect, so useful in evolution theory, could lead us to the Argument From Design: such artfulness implies an artist.

But it is a long leap from this impulse to the toll exacted by religious societies. A further jump would be to trace how dominance hierarchies among primates got elevated into ceremonies for gods unseen, to ends unknown.

We can play the sociobiology game again: Lay bare a benefit, explain the behavior. How did the hominid get religion?

Amplifying group solidarity seems a promising avenue: faith as social cement. In its extreme form it could even get the believer to go off on crusades for territory (on to Jerusalem!), wealth, or women for the gene pool. In its paranoid form, this idea becomes a conspiracy theory: faith as a con game culturally inherited to benefit an elite.

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Or perhaps religion is a side effect of some other, deeper strategy, cultural or genetic. Like antlers on elk, the (often-celibate) priesthood could arise from runaway sexual selection. Then our elaborations would arise from some cultural positive feedback, which runs unchecked, absorbing a society's resources to surprising levels. Our joy at football games seems like this, an old gaming urge rendered impotent (we fear no injury to ourselves, and actually pay to see it) but still hypnotic, so that we care for the struggles of players whom we see only as small figures on TV screens, as abstract as the Holy Trinity.

Convergent social evolution could explain religion's global hold. As the pharaohs knew well, it is a handy way to extract service by promising a long-term payoff in the afterlife. So the world's first large society was in fact a Thantocracy, based on a theory and solution to the greatest human problem, death. The power of theology then comes from our ability to forecast, which helps in overcoming our environment but saddles us with the looming menace of our end. This culturally transmitted notion, or meme, would spread readily, since we hunger to resolve the anxiety brought on by the fear of death.

Of course, evolution works on individuals, not groups, and there are plenty of beneficiaries to religious practice. While Catholicism's priests are (usually) celibate, their congregations reproduce often because doctrine forbids contraception. As well, societies with strong faith can expand at the point of a sword (Islam) or a prayer book (Mormons), promoting its adherents. A mixture of cultural and genetic payoffs follows. None of this need be cynical; the priesthood believes, too, perhaps more so than the followers. The memes are simply using an opening in the human world view, which gives the meme an advantage.

Science is similar, though we seldom think of it this way. It imposes a meta-meme on any theory, the tests of the prediction-verification cycle, and of logic itself. Science has visible triumphs, however, as theories sharpen and our understanding and control of nature grows. But religion has no such apparent feedback from the world; the gods do not answer their mail. Miracles are few and not reproducible.

THE PERSISTENCE OF FAITH

So why does religion remain, even grow, in our science-dominated

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age? Will it continue to do so? While science explores a different province of knowledge, historically it has pushed against the earlier claims organized religion made about the physical world. This persists today in rival claims about the nature of revelation. Still, scientists as notable as Charles Townes, who received the Nobel Prize for devising the maser (and thus the later laser), believe that a god lies behind natural order. I have known Charles for decades, attended a religious conference with him in Calcutta, and I am sure his faith is real. He sees no contradiction, and many scientists don't — but others feel there will always be an antagonism between the two world views, and they will clash in the public arena.

As a voice of authority, science has largely won the day in the public arena, where concrete polities get disputed. Only in moral issues does religion hold sway.

Religion has some defenses, of course. Religious leaders can always point offstage to the true source of their rules and proclamations: the unseen God. This gets them off the hook for unpopular edicts, and enforces compliance with the implied threat that the Big Boss upstairs will be unhappy. To outside criticism there are deeper, memetic defenses. Many sects hold firmly that all forms of reason do not apply to faith, disarming the rationalist arsenal. Retreating from public miracles to the interior miracle of a personal relationship with God, as in the Protestant revolution, takes many disputable points off the table.

Such appeals find broad audiences. Cults spread today, probably fueled by a felt cultural vacancy. Our times, and the scientific world view driving them, are complex; many find the combination literally dispiriting. Faith has an obliging simplicity. In the unending human search for meaning, faith is restful. It spurs few further questions.

But other features of religion are hard to explain this way. Why do religions globally use the motif of gifts offered to God? Perhaps the answer can be drawn from B. F. Skinner's experiments, in which pigeons who were fed at random spontaneously showed "superstitious behavior," reproducing what they were doing when the food first started appearing. This fear that bad things will follow failure to observe ritual makes sense as a habit-forming impulse in the ordinary world: look both ways when entering traffic, be sure that knife is safely put away, check that the barn door is

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locked. Generalizing from such programming seems straightforward.

But still, but still....

Mechanistic explanations do not seem to capture the essence of religion. There are big questions about our origins — indeed, about the origins of the universe and of natural law. Science grips these enigmas only tentatively, as in the current fashion to greet new cosmological discoveries with cries that we have "found the fingerprints of God" — as if He were a suspect in a shrouded mystery. With its agenda of always seeking the more fundamental cause, by looking for ever more general laws, science butts against the last question: what causes the laws? Imagining an agency that stands outside of Nature, providing a rock for logic's fulcrum, is tempting.

Early societies were polytheistic and later ones consolidated their beliefs into one God. This parsimony of explanation parallels that of science, which moved from Aristotle's many special cases to general laws, like gravitation and classical mechanics, to explain the seen world. All converge on the grand riddle: why is there something, with all its order, rather than nothing? Why laws at all? Human laws often go flouted, but natural ones cannot be, by assumption. We automatically assume that the cosmos cannot err. Yet, if we start from the beginning without imposing our longing for design, chaos seems as likely an outcome as the scrupulous harmonies revealed by science.

Natural law argues for a dominance of Mind over Matter in the universe. Of course, one can prefer to view this as a dance between the two. If Mind brought us forth from Matter, enabling the universe to comprehend itself (do its own homework), then religion is an instinctive (using the term loosely) manifestation of this. But this abstract way of envisioning the deep devout impulse in humanity does not quite capture the heart-thumping urgency of faith.

Something is missing, and probably will always remain so. This feeling of lack, perhaps even more than the rituals and leaps of faith, frames an important part of being human.

FUTURE FAITHS

For centuries, science has atomized experience, the better to analyze it. Our chimpanzee minds work best by isolating each cause as cleanly as possible, then assigning

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simple rules — Newton's Laws, quantum mechanics, etc. — to predict how simple systems will behave.

Doing this to people seemed quite fruitful at first, yielding the chunky mechanics of Freud. Alas, we are not "simple systems" and the dream of easy understanding has lapsed. We writers rely on what I shall term "folk psychology," gleaned from experience but lacking a fundamental knowledge.

Now we — our Selves — confront this remorseless dividing engine, asking finally if the liberal humanist "subject" really exists. Do our Selves truly run our inner machinery? If so, what to make of the unconscious, which creates our sentences before we quite know what they are? Experiments show that we make decisions and begin actions fractions of a second before the conscious mind knows what is going on. And where do truly profound ideas come from, springing to mind as images or, in the case of Einstein, kinesthetic sensations?

Perhaps the views of our minds held by such as Marvin Minsky — a society of mind populated by "agents" and "constellations" of "infomatic creatures" — are better models than the autonomous Self who rules from above, the mind's eye peering out at the objective world.

Our troubles as writers grew worse in the 1940s, when Claude Shannon and Norbert Weiner gave purely mathematical definitions of information, independent of mind. How information in the brain comes about awaited our current ideas of self-organizing systems, used now all the way from studying the origin of life to how we have an idea.

In sf, we often see images of disembodied intellect. Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End* envisions a rapture of intellect, soaring above the greasy burden of the body. The Extropians yearn for the virtual bodies of uploading, where they will dwell in cyber-heaven forever.

If our Selves are solely information, and can exist independent of the substrate of matter — chemical/biological now, cybernetic later, perhaps plasma or magnetic forms in the far future — where does a writer center his story?

The roots of this problem are deep. Religion unifies our sense of self, and analysis atomizes. What happens when they collide?

I do not believe our intellects can be truly disembodied, because our thinking is so rooted in our nervous systems, their kinesthetic senses and analogies to aid suppos-

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edly abstract thought. We propose logical alternatives, after all, by saying "On the other hand...."

The problem worsens when we attempt to portray the sheer alien feel of self-as-information. Critics have lifted sf ideas into studies of cyborgs and "disembodied" or "decontextualized" work, but they do not seem to grasp the dilemma of the narrative self which still must communicate to readers who experience themselves as antonymous beings — most definitely not ontologically split from their being, after all, smart chimpanzees.

Indeed, here this coming conceptual catastrophe collides with my earlier subject: seeing ourselves as products of evolution's anvil. What a work is man, indeed — but one made by pressures on an ancient African veldt we cannot ever occupy, though it still drives our Selves and our societies. We have an enormous talent for extending our tribal loyalties of hundreds up into societies of a billion, transforming village allegiance into nationalism. But what becomes of such skills when we know ourselves fully as engines of fitness selection? When we see the mechanisms of socialization operating — and can change them, acting directly upon the brain (that bag of information, remember?).

Think further: What would we be like if we could intervene directly in our own minds? Suppress some moods, legislate others? See directly where an idea comes from, frothing forth as a tide of self-organizing images rooted in analogy (our most common reasoning tool, more dexterous than mere formal logic)?

In other words, is such self-knowledge going to be mostly bad news? For the atomization of our Selves which began with the Darwinnowings of evolution, proceeded through the blunt sectionings of psychology, and now gnaw at our sense of integration — these forces can turn off a readership which cannot like the sense of shattered self such stories promise.

Self-knowledge could lead to an existential nausea, or a hall-of-mirrors horror. Or, to conclude on a more positive note, this could lead to an appreciation of our Selves as emergent order, not reducible to easy rules at all. We do not know what this grand search will find.

Of one point I am sure: As readers, we finally demand some being to finally actually *be* — for accounts to settle, for stories to have meaning, imposed by some sense of integrated life.

I am working on a novel that

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confronts these issues directly, imagining technology we can glimpse in the present.

As our ability to control our own minds grows, moral issues will arise swiftly. Electronic and chemical means will allow us to experience intense states of mind quickly, while still going about our ordinary world. *This means that states of spiritual knowing can come to the aid of everyday life.*

Together with computer augmentation of the brain, this shall transform our religious and social senses. For those who choose to manage their own minds with advanced technology, the present, time-intense world will be replaced by one allowing genuine reverie, without reducing efficiency. (Indeed, one functions better in a state of existential calm. It is healthier, too.)

But will this new ability damage our sense of an inherent Godliness in the universe? Will some become so addicted to holy ecstasy that they become a new kind—the "wirehead" devout? Will traditional faiths reject such people? Should they?

Fiction can tell us deeper truths about where we are going only by peering at these discomforting possibilities, asking the hard questions, and dwelling in worlds to come. Science needs such guidance, now more than ever.

Comments on this column welcome at gbenford@uci.edu, or Physics Dept., Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92697

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Tina Kuzminski lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her daughter Romney who is nearly five years old. Ms. Kuzminski has published poetry in a variety of journals under the name Tina Stevens, but this terrific story marks her first published work of fiction.

In many countries, the traditional way for children to dispose of their baby teeth involves throwing them on the roof. In Spain, a little mouse named Ratoncito Pérez allegedly snatches teeth left under pillows and leaves a small token in their place. And what do we get here in the United States?

The Goddamned Tooth Fairy

By Tina Kuzminski

CALLIE'S GOT HER HANDS in my face. Palms out, she's making square frames. She squints at her compositions of my nose and mouth and eyes. I want to say, "Sweetheart, Daddy's trying to look good for his first date since before you were born, so could you sit still and pretend you're no trouble at all until I get the lady out the door?" Callie's sitting on the kitchen table. Since I don't mind when nobody's here, I don't say anything about that, either.

Iris is winding her purse tight on its long strap and letting it spin out the kinks, over and over, while she looks at Callie's drawings taped on the fridge. Iris has real pretty brown hair, curly, but most of the time it's covering up her face which is even prettier. Her purse bounces on a perfect calf, leading up stretchy, snug pants to a shirttail that doesn't quite cover Iris's round little ass.

"And you know what else we learned in Art today, Daddy? Daddy?"

Callie kicks me lightly in the knees. She always was a stickler about quality attention. Ma said I spoiled her, but I just said she was mine to spoil.

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"What, honey?" I say. I'm probably taking a drubbing in the *Devoted to Date* category, but maybe I'll pick up a few points on *Is Kind to Children and Small Animals.*

"Perspective." Callie pronounces it carefully, proudly. She's aware another pair of ears is listening, another potential member for a captive audience. "You put a dot in the middle of your paper. That's where everything disappears. That's where the horizon is and you draw these lines from the dot to the edge of your paper. You can make buildings and streets and trees and telephone poles and buses and clouds and people and they all get bigger and bigger and bigger the closer they get."

I can tell she's just getting warmed up.

"Sorry about this," I say to Iris. "Can I get you a drink or something?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine," Iris says.

Shawna's late, which isn't unusual, but I told her if she was late tonight I'd have her hide. Shawna takes care of Callie quite a bit on the weekend when Best offers as much as twelve bucks an hour.

Callie's measuring tiny people, so small she can barely see them, with her fingers. Her straight blonde hair is sticking up in places like pampas grass. I smooth it down. She's got Iris in the little box between thumbs and index fingers so she can watch Iris on the sly.

I met Iris at Best Telemarketing. Only place I could find quick work at last summer when I moved up here from Kentucky. Me and Callie left when she got out of second grade. More than a quarter century's long enough to spend in one place, I think. Grew up in Powell County. Swore I'd never go back, but after my wife died, I took Callie and went home to Ma, stocked and bagged at her grocery store. At twenty-nine, I figured I was the oldest bag boy alive. I didn't want to hit thirty, still working for Ma and living at home.

So I loaded everything we owned in my pickup and said I was going as far as it'd get me. Ma said I was wrecking Callie's life. Ma had been saying that for years and Callie was the smartest child I'd ever seen, so I couldn't see how I was that bad an influence. Give me a few more years ringing up groceries for every old woman in Slade saying, "I don't want my bread on the bottom, now," and I might be a right hindrance to myself and Callie.

The doorbell buzzes a couple minutes after I start grinding my teeth. I let Shawna in. She drops her backpack on the couch.

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"Sorry Mr. Blackburn, but Mom said if I didn't wash the dishes now and then I wouldn't be allowed to baby-sit no more for nobody and I got done with everything and she added these huge pots, but I hurried, Mr. Blackburn."

What Shawna's got to say depends on how much breath she has in her when she starts to say it. She's fourteen and Callie loves her. She puts kitty and smiley and heart stickers on Callie's shirts and lets Callie play with her makeup.

"That's okay, Shawna," I say. "Better late than never."

She's peeping around me to the kitchen, checking out Iris. Shawna's eyes are opened wide behind her round, red frames.

"Your hair looks real nice today," I say to Shawna.

Her hand immediately flies up to touch her hair, make sure it's still there. "Thanks Mr. Blackburn. Mom put relaxer in it for me last night. She says I got the stubbornest hair alive and no way is it gonna look like Loki Smoki."

"You and your Ma did a great job," I say.

I watch enough MTV to know what Loki Smoki looks like. Four big women, long black hair, sexy as hell. Me and Callie get cable for twenty-six dollars a month. That's a lot on my budget, but we don't get out much.

"Try and keep Callie out of trouble, Shawna. Me and Iris'll be back around midnight and I'll walk you home."

Shawna just lives in the next apartment building over from us, but I always see to it she gets in her Ma's door if it's after dark when I get back from Best.

Callie's in the kitchen pestering Iris. Iris has on this belt that's got a big shell for a buckle and Callie's about to undress her to see the other side and make sure it's real.

"Callie, leave Iris alone for Pete's sake."

"What'd the tooth fairy leave for ya, Cal?" Shawna asks.

"Nothing!" Callie tattles on me.

I'd forgotten all about paying up last night. Told her the tooth fairy had to take time off from work like everybody else, that Callie must have hit one of the Fairy Holidays. I said if she tried it again tonight, she'd probably get overtime pay.

Iris is smiling. "It's okay."

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She's got her belt off and is showing it to Callie. The other side isn't polished and that convinces Callie it's a real shell. She's impressed now with the polished side, a mixture of blues and greens and black.

"It's called abalone," Iris says.

"Ab ah loney," Callie says, "and it really comes from the sea?"

"Well, I got it at the mall, but before that I'm sure it came from the sea."

"Let Iris get dressed, honey. We're gonna be late."

Iris is driving. Her car's parked on the street, taking two parking spots. It's a gold LTD, about a '78. My pickup's even older, a '72 Chevy, and it hasn't give out yet, but I got so bored crossing Illinois and Iowa that I stopped in Omaha anyhow.

I wait till Iris puts on her seat belt to put mine on. If she didn't wear one, I didn't want to look like I was scared of her driving.

"You've never been to the track before?" she asks.

I'm pretty sure she asked me that earlier today when we got off work, but I'm no great shakes at conversation, either. "Nope, never have been. I'd never heard of racing dogs before I saw them one night on TV."

"They play the results every night except Mondays on 42," she says.

"You go a lot?"

Iris shakes her head and lodges some more hair over her face. I want to brush it back with my hand.

"No, not that much," she says. "Thursdays, sometimes. That's half-price night."

April's come in warm, sixty-four the high today, and Iris has on a T-shirt. She always wears long-sleeved shirts at work. Iris keeps her hands on the bottom half of the steering wheel. She's got about a dozen bracelets on. Wood and brass and copper and shell ones. They clink and chime when she turns corners. While she's preoccupied with driving and talking, I watch her mouth, full and creamy red with lipstick, the way it moves, which side goes up first when she smiles. That T-shirt looks damned fine on her — just shy of a 38, I'd say, and in good shape.

We've got the windows rolled down and a strong coffee smell floats in as we cross the Missouri into Council Bluffs. It's the Butternut factory down the river, roasting beans. Always makes me think of Omaha as a good cup of black coffee.

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"So how long've you worked for Best?" I ask Iris.

"Oh, two years or so. I'm taking night classes at Metro Tech in computer graphics. What about you?"

"Just since last July."

"Are you taking classes anywhere?"

"Nah."

I guess she wants to know if I'm going to be stuck at Best all my life. I have most of a B.A. in history which is about as useful as not having anything at all. But that's from the days when I was with Callie's mom. I don't want to get into that right now.

Iris isn't too happy with my answer, but I start talking about something else and she doesn't hold grudges.

At Bluffs Run, I look back at the car as we walk away. About five foot of the tail is sticking out in the lane. I notice most of the license plates are Nebraska, with Iowa plates next, and then a handful of Kansas and Missouri. We walk into this open area that has a glass front facing the track. There's a whole bunch of people standing around, as mixed a crowd as I've ever seen. Old black ladies with their reading glasses on, college boys with those spiky haircuts and hundred dollar running shoes, married couples in their forties knocking back a few beers, greasy-haired old geezers with steno pads and pencils stuck inside the earpiece of their glasses, tough cowboy types dressed more for a rodeo, and some scrawny kids that look underage.

Iris says she'll get us a program we can share, so I go to a hotdog stand and buy a couple of beers.

A voice on the intercom says, "Ladies and gentlemen, the dogs are on the track for tonight's third race. Please make your wagers early to avoid being shut out at the mutuel windows." The man goes on to give each dog's name and weight. There's TV monitors everywhere you look, showing the dogs in their numbered jackets.

Iris thanks me for the beer, turns the program to the third race and hands it to me. "I'll show you how it works. There's eight dogs in each race, and you can bet on them in several different ways. Win, place, and show is first, second, and third, but that doesn't pay anything."

She takes a drink of beer and her bottom lip leaves a red crescent moon on the cup. "And the quiniela bet is where you pick two dogs to come in

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first and second, any order. Say you pick eight and one. It doesn't matter which one comes in first or second as long as both come in. An exacta's where you bet which order they'll come in. For the trifecta, you choose the three dogs that finish first, but it's really hard to get those. Shit, it's hard to hit quinielas."

"Then I'll stick with those, how about?"

"Two minutes till post time. Better hurry if you want to bet this race."

"I'll wait and do the next one," I say. "See how it's done first."

"Okay," she says. "I'll get in line. You can come with me if you like."

She explains while we're in line how to give the clerk your bet, first the amount, then the kind of bet you're making, and the number of the dogs you're betting on.

"Two dollar quiniela, three and seven," she says to the woman who punches it in and hands her a silver ticket. "That's all there is to it," Iris says.

We go outside to sit down and watch the race. There's a strong wind chasing plastic cups and cigarette butts around the stands. It's too strong even to set your beer down and it blows Iris's hair up and out of her face. She's so pretty I feel like the wind stole the next breath I had coming. The dogs are led to the starting gate and the young handlers run back. One of them's a girl, and I hear some punks at the fence make loud comments about betting on a pair like that.

More lights get turned on. The electric rabbit starts squeaking its way around the rail. A guy behind me yells, "Here comes Rusty," just before the announcer says, "Here comes Lucky," the way Ed used to say, "Here's Johnny."

The dogs rip out of their stalls hell-bent on catching the sparking rabbit. A couple of them wipe out on the first turn. Seven's in the lead, but three's near the back. As they come around the bend, seven falls behind, and the number two dog passes him. Iris lets the wind grab her ticket and shrugs.

There's groans and cheers but mainly groans. I wedge my beer between my knees and study the lineup for the fourth race. Bust A Gut, Some Fine Day, Macy's Magic, PD's Lizzy Longjohns, Who Dr. Who, Iowa Dawn, Ain't Misbehaving, and Sweet So and So. I ignore the odds because I don't feel like getting too precise about all this and pick out Who Dr. Who

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and Ain't Misbehaving. Five and seven. Iris wants to follow the odds board a bit before placing her bet, so I drink my beer and watch the numbers change across the black screen behind the track. There's a big coffee cup in the distance on a pole. Novelty billboard. Has the word OASIS on it in big block letters.

I get in line behind Iris. She bets one and five. I say "Who Dr. Who" before I remember the clerk wants the number, not the name. I look down at the program and say, "Uh, that's five and seven."

The silver ticket looks somehow fragile, easily altered. I hold it in the palm of my hand, not folding it. We stand at the fence this time. I'm surprised by how my heart pounds when the dogs come out of the gate and I've got a personal stake in who's finishing first. My dogs are quick in the lead. I start yelling like everybody else.

Number four edges up as they're heading to the finish line and finishes a nose in front of Who Dr. Who. I glance down at the program. It was Lizzy Longjohns. Iris's number one dog, Bust A Gut, came in third.

We go to the bleachers to look over the next page in the program. What I really like is these dogs' names. I'd like a job just thinking up names for all the new litters of pups. I like how the names are clever and mean something. I always thought a name should mean something, seeing as how I got named Ute. Once, I asked Ma what Ute meant and she said "You was named after Uncle Ute." When I asked what his name meant, she said "He was named after Great Grandpappy Ute. What else you want to know?" I gave up on it. But me and Jenny named Callie after Calliope, the goddess of epic poetry. Soon as she discovered her lungs, though, I thought she took after the circus organ a whole lot more than some Greek goddess.

The fifth race has Cornflakesandmilk, Sassy Lass, Make Me An Offer, Just Sam, Uzifire, Shadowylady, PD's Betty Bikini and See See Rider.

I choose Cornflakesandmilk and See See Rider. Iris goes for the dogs with the best odds — Make Me An Offer at five and two and Just Sam, seven and two. Iris says she'll walk the bets up this time if I'll hold her beer. There's about a swallow left in it, but I say sure.

She takes my two dollars. I drink the rest of my beer and set the cup on the concrete where the wind snatches it and rolls it around with all its buddies. A few early moths are cartwheeling around the spotlights.

An old man, with shrunken-in cheeks and a funny-looking chin

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jutting in front of his face, sits down next to me with a program and a green sheet in his hand. The green sheets are for sale in the front and predict which dogs are going to win.

"You want a tip?" he says.

"Sure," I say.

"Marry that girl."

I laugh. "I hardly know her."

"Don't matter. She's the one for you."

"How's your luck on the dogs?" I ask him.

"Could be better, but it's been worse. I got a feeling about the eighth. It's a maiden race, so that's about all you can go on. A feeling." He kind of chews around with his jaw while he's thinking.

The old man's got on a Goodwill kind of tweed coat, too heavy despite the wind. He smells like an old man, a hint of piss and tobacco and dry rot. I wonder if I should follow Iris to ditch him but decide he's harmless. This track's probably the codger's whole life.

"What's your feeling tell you?" I say.

"That three dog's a winner."

I flip through the program and read the eighth race lineup. Texmex Tornado, Peekaboo, Dark Iris, Macy's Minefield, Snappy Heels, Dapper Danny, Bodhisattva, and Sleepytime Gal. I smile because number three is called Dark Iris. It's a neat coincidence.

"What would you bet for the quiniela?"

"Don't mess with'em," he says. "I wheel a trifecta. Put me down for three, seven and eight. But, if you like them quinielas, you could box that instead."

"What's that?" I say. "This is about the first time I've done this."

"You put your money on any of three dogs to finish first and second, see. You box it. Three, seven and eight. Any combination. Six bucks."

"Well, I just might do that, sir," I tell him. "Thanks for the tip. Both of them."

Iris comes back with another couple of beers and pours the last drink into her new cup. The man must've skedaddled when he saw her coming because he's gone, and there's a young couple beside us juggling popcorn containers and spilling beer on themselves.

"Thanks, Iris."

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"You're welcome, Ute," she says.

She uses my name like Callie says "perspective," careful to get it right. She gives me a big smile when I try to sneak an arm around her shoulders by first stretching my arm out along the metal bleacher. The lights go up. Iris drops our tickets on the program in my lap. She does it so quick, I jump a little bit. Spooked by foil paper. I'm one smooth operator.

I finally get my arm around her solid and say, "Next time I'm going to bet on the rabbit. Seems like it's the one that always wins." The night wind is stealing what's left of the day's heat, and her arm is cool to the touch.

She laughs at my bad jokes even.

Make Me An Offer and Cornflakesandmilk come in first and second so between us we picked out the winners, but we didn't have them both on the same ticket.

"I think I'll sit a couple of races out. I got a plan," I say. Actually, it's the old man's plan. "But I'll take your bets up if you like."

She smiles and does this pretty thing with her eyes, looking away, then looking back at me. I feel something akin to the dogs tearing loose from post position, like I got to get somewhere fast.

"Think I'll just wait a few out, too," Iris says. "I'm bad luck for the dogs I pick."

"No way," I tell her. "If you didn't bet on them, they'd come in last instead of third and fourth."

Iris rests her beer on my knee that's propped up, and I play with a bracelet.

"You were real nice to let Callie see your belt," I say. "She's always been so curious. Sometimes she doesn't know when to quit."

"No, no. It was fun. I like her. She was being so sweet about it."

"You got any kids?" I ask.

She shakes her head.

"No husbands, either, I hope?"

She shakes her head fast and giggles. "I'm thirty-two, though. Mom thinks I'm over the hill. She doesn't even ask me anymore if I'm seeing anybody."

"Well, I will. Are you?"

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She puts her face close to mine, nose almost touching my nose, and nods solemnly. She reminds me of Callie when Callie's putting me on about something.

"Who?" I ask, knowing it's a setup.

"You."

She's too close not to take a chance. I kiss her mouth lightly, and she kisses me back. We take a drink of beer just to have something to do.

Four minutes till post time in the eighth, I go up and stumble my way around asking the lady for a quiniela box on Dark Iris, Bodhisattva and Sleepytime Gal. I come back and Iris hands me my beer.

I show her the program. "Look, I put a bet on you. Dark Iris."

She examines the dog's previous race times. "Comes in sixth place a lot," she says. "You'll be lucky if she doesn't fall down in the first stretch and take a nap."

"I've got a feeling," I say. Might as well steal somebody else's lines.

We go to the fence and look down the track where the handlers are jogging toward us. People are getting louder as the night wears on. Several people yell when the rabbit swings around the loop and rattles past where the dogs are whining and scratching the gate. Number four gets an early lead and three is in the back. I holler some much needed encouragement to Dark Iris.

Several dogs collide in the first turn, and there's Dark Iris, near the front on the back stretch.

I'm jumping up and down, sloshing beer on my shoes. "Come on Iris, you can do it. Come on three. Come on."

Dark Iris hauls ass. She's running so fast I don't see her feet touch dirt. She tears by the finishing post and zooms on past. I was so intent on her that I forgot to see who came in second or third.

The numbers appear on the board. Three, eight, and five. Snappy Heels beat out Bodhisattva. The old man who gave me the tip probably lost this one. I look down at my ticket. Three, seven and eight boxed quiniela.

"What did you bet?" Iris asks.

"I think I might have won," I say.

She looks at my ticket and then back at the board and squeals. "You sure did. You won. Wait, there's the figures — quiniela — sixty-eight dollars. You won sixty-eight dollars."

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We go up to turn my ticket in and watch a couple of races on the monitors. People brush by us to get to the windows. Iris hooks her right index finger in my back belt loop. I like the way it feels. Like I'm anchored.

Before the last races are run, we get a head start out of the parking lot. Bright yellow work horses are turned on their sides for barricades. They look like the A's on Callie's report cards out for a night on the town.

The Woodmen Tower's a lit up marker for downtown Omaha, a totem of steel and electricity. Long as you're getting closer to it, you know you're heading the right way. Iris turns on the radio and a singer is saying he understands about indecision. The beat seems to time the white dashes as they slip past Iris's gold LTD. I've always noticed that when you've got the radio on when you're on the road, the world starts acting like it's a movie for the music you're playing. People drive by you, pedestrians cross in front of you, cows graze and horses run, all moving in time to a song they can't hear.

Iris taps her fingers on the wheel.

I reach over and lightly caress the back of her hand. "I'd like to share my big winnings with you. Cheeseburger, fries, sound good to you?"

We pull up at the Thrill Grill, an all-night hangout full of college kids poking at the lava lamps on the tables. It's a '60s theme, I guess. There's wallpaper that looks like tie-dyed T-shirts and incense burners and psychedelic music playing. Can't smell the incense for the greasy burgers, but it all adds up to an atmosphere the twenty-something and under set feel right at home with.

One kid with a half-shaved head has a chicken wire and leather jacket with a chain hanging down his hip that's got to be rated heavy duty enough to swing a wrecking ball. A real pretty girl's wearing a flimsy blouse with one button buttoned right in front of her breasts. She's maybe seventeen. I know she didn't walk out of the house tonight like that. I stick it in the back of my mind what can be done to an outfit after it's passed parental inspection. As Callie gets older, I got to get smarter about those things.

I go through the cafeteria-style line while Iris scopes for a table. She finds one by the front window that's got about a hundred spider plants hanging in it. I forget the plastic pillows of ketchup and mustard. I pick up straws and napkins on my way back to the table. This date thing's got me rattled. But it sure has its good parts, too. Iris's got her hand up examining

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a spider plant baby, a fat little rush of leaves tiptoeing through the air on a dozen white legs. By the deadening blanch of red and yellow track lights above the table, I see these wide puckered scars, not across her wrist but down, following the blue veins. I scuff my feet and throw the condiment packets on the table like I just got back. She drops her hand. Her bracelets settle evenly as slats on a venetian blind. I don't know if she noticed that the scars showed.

I salt the fries and start eating my cheeseburger to keep from talking. I keep seeing those scars, thinking weird shit, like what they'd feel like to the tip of a tongue. I get this picture of Iris holding a butcher knife up B-movie slasher style. It makes me feel the same way I felt seeing Jenny in the morgue, only not nearly as strong, or my hamburger would have been moving in another direction. But I can't concentrate on eating and keep up a conversation at the moment. I just hope Iris thinks I'm not much of one to talk when I eat. She's quiet, too. Acts like she's checking out the nightlife around us.

I look around. The chicken wire boy and his one-button girlfriend are next to us. In one of them strange switches Generation X has pulled, he's wearing strappy sandals, she's got on combat boots. Behind Iris is a balding guy. I can't see his face, but I can tell he's the oldest guy in the place. What's more, if he wasn't, me and Iris would be in dead heat for the part. I feel my heart harden toward her. She's getting old in spite of herself. She wanted to quit. Tried to. She doesn't look so good to me all of a sudden.

I finally realize Iris is repeating my name. "What?" I say.

"Asked if you liked, if you and Callie liked, going to the movies. Is there something wrong?"

"No, why?" I lie, letting the right amount of confusion and injury mix in my tone.

"Oh, I just thought, oh it's nothing." She puts down her half-eaten hamburger. "I'll be right back. Pit stop."

I sit there for ten or fifteen minutes watching the old man turn pages of a newspaper before my knee gets to jerking up and down. Some idiot's been pumping the jukebox with his pocket change to keep the same damn song playing over and over. I get up to stretch, wondering if Iris climbed out the bathroom window.

The old man folds his newspaper and looks around at me. The geezer

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from the dog track. What the hell was he doing here? We'd left early. I'd taken him for a die-hard who'd stick around till the sweep-up crew shooed him out.

"Sit down, Ute," he said, waving a palsied hand at a chair.

Had he overheard Iris talking to me? I glance back at the curtain of beads that leads to the bathrooms, don't see Iris coming, and sit down. If she ducked out on me, maybe I won't look like such a rube if I'm sitting with the old man for a while. He rolls up the newspaper and stares down the tube he's made at the table. Whips it around on me like a gun scope. Then again, I think, if he's apeshit as a sock puppet, I'm going to look stupid after all.

"Ute," he says. "I've been reading about you."

"What?" I say. "My girl's got a problem or something in the ladies, I got to go see — "

"And you didn't make the front page," the old fart says, "hell, you didn't even make the front section."

His eyes are bloodshot, a nasty color of dull green, unblinking like a frog. He's shaking the paper in front of my nose. I can see dirt under his thick, yellow fingernails that looks like it's been there for years.

I get this numb feeling at the nape of my neck that spreads like a souped up version of gangrene.

"Best they could do to report on your little shattered world was page three of the Metro section," he says and curls that bottom lip over his top.

I grab the paper he's jabbing in my face and slap it down, check the date. That rotten sensation grips my whole body, nowhere tighter than in the groin. The date across the top is the day after Jenny was killed. There'd been a photo of a state official indicted for embezzlement on the front of the paper that day. I'm looking at a picture of the same fucker now. Everything had pointed to him siphoning off close to a hundred thou of tax dollars, but he never saw a day behind bars. In the dark months after Jenny was gone that seemed to sum up what I felt about the world. The bad don't necessarily pay for what they do, the good pay and pay and some bastard robs the war chest when the money's bloody enough.

The old man's sitting there nodding his head. My mouth is open, but I can't get words to come out of it.

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"It's all in your perspective," he says and holds up thumb and forefinger of each hand and looks at me through the frame.

Just like Callie had done.

I'm shaking with fear or anger or, more like it, both. Is he some old pervert who's been following Callie around, finding out everything about her he could? Is Callie okay with Shawna or had he killed the girls early on in the evening then come to torment me before I found out? I'm halfway out of my chair when his left arm snakes out and he grips my sleeve, that bottom jaw sawing back and forth.

"Sure, it's a risk, Ute. Win, lose, or die," he says, biting each word in a mean way, "it's a chance you take. You might be throwing your money away. Or your heart. You might get buried yourself. But sometimes you get lucky for a few years. You get to live with your woman, raise a baby, spend them long nights fucking each other until your knees can hardly get you to the john. This Iris girl, you're going to write her off without knowing a damned thing about what she's been through. You think maybe there's been women who looked in your eyes and saw hurt and death and decided they wanted nothing to do with you?"

I sit back down. So he was hanging around because of Iris. He could be her father for all I know. The whole family could be psycho. He'd just been snooping around the track to see how Iris's date was going, then he followed us here. For the sixth or seventh time, the Doors are whining about riders in the storm, and I'm about to take apart the music machine or the asswipe operating it.

I glare over my shoulder. The chicken wire guy is laughing like a hyena, chomping into his hamburger, and yelling at a guy across the room with his mouth full. I feel grim as a sonofabitch, but I'll play along with Iris and this old dude's game for a few more minutes. Then I'm going to forget tonight ever happened.

"You know, Ute," the old man says, "you haven't got many more chances. Jenny wouldn't want you to pass up one good as this."

"You don't know fuck about my dead wife," I say. Playing along's not the same as buying it.

"I can't guarantee you a happy ending, you know. I don't see into the future too far," he says. "But I got a gut feeling you won't get a better opportunity to make one happen."

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Chicken wire boy throws a fry at his buddy giving him the finger from over by the cash register. It hits one of those cheap bank calendars with just one scenic picture for every blessed month. Lands to the right of a ketch sailing past a sun bigger than life on the horizon.

"She was raped by her stepdaddy," he says. "Right before she did that surgery on herself."

"I don't want to know," I say.

"And it'll be a long time before she'll tell you her reasons. Don't have to read tea leaves or innards to predict that."

"You're one messed up old fucker," I say.

"But I'm telling you now. You got to trust the world again, Ute. Callie's trying to help you. She wants more out of life than you hiding like a hermit crab in that dingy, half-buried so-called garden apartment."

My heart jackknifes — he knows where I live, he's been there — but he keeps on talking.

"I know I should mind my own business, and I do, day after day. But I get worn down now and then and have to point a few things out. Things that might get missed and when they're such little things and might mean so much...." The old geezer coughs.

I haven't got a clue what he's going on about and I don't give a shit. I've got that tired feeling I get sometimes, like I just want to lie down and sleep forever or until the world blows up, whichever comes first. The jukebox stops for the count of nine, then the lizard king is retelling the sob story about people dumb enough to pick up hitchhikers. My heart's beating like murder. I yank around to see if I can spot the asshole monopolizing the airwaves. Nobody's standing by the jukebox. Chicken wire boy is still spewing out his hamburger — he'll end up amusing himself to death when he chokes on it.

The one-button girl shifts her head and runs shiny red fingernails along her collarbone. The gesture reminds me of something. A strange feeling gets in the pit of my stomach. They don't look around at me even though I've been staring at them for longer than's socially acceptable. I'm breathing kind of heavy, watching them, ignoring the old man, waiting for something to happen but not knowing what the hell it could be.

When chicken wire boy kicks back his chair to aim a fry, I look over at the cash register, at the guy holding his wallet in one hand, middle

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finger thrust up on the other. The fry flaps against paper, inch and a half from the ketch.

Not giving a shit what anybody thinks, I run to the calendar and see the oily smudge where the fry hit. I touch it and feel the grease between my fingers. Nobody's looking at me. I walk around the tables like an idiot, and nobody looks up at me. I go to the table chicken wire boy is sitting at and eat one of his fries. He's rocking his chair on its back legs. I'm right in front of him, pawing in his fries for one salted just the way I like, and he's staring through me.

I lift the basket of fries and dump them on the floor. The white paper lining the basket flutters after the scattered fries. Chicken wire boy doesn't notice. One-button girl brushes her hair back and looks bored.

I slump back in the chair by the old man and hold on to the edge of the table.

"Iris hasn't been gone long as you think, see. But she feels bad as you figured on. She's afraid you saw the scars. If she tells you about that, she's worried sick what else she'll have to tell you. And after you start talking about some of the ugliest shit in the world, people start sidling away from you." The old man scratches his shiny forehead. "You think about it. I got to head on out."

He's almost to the door.

I shout, "Wait a minute. Hold on."

He waits for me to cross the room.

"Who are you?" I say, although it's not the only question I have or even the most important one.

"I'm the goddamned tooth fairy," he says. But he says it gentle like. He sounds tired, too.

I don't know how to answer him. I watch him leave. I'm standing right by the guy who flips chicken wire boy the bird. Chicken wire boy puts his hand where the basket of fries used to be and snaps a piece of pure air across the room. Nothing hits the calendar this time.

Nerves shot to hell, I go back to the table me and Iris had been sitting at. What else could I do? I didn't want to try that door out of the Thrill Grill and find I couldn't open it.

I count eight seconds of silence after the Doors finish their parable of roadkill.

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Nine.

Grace Slick is singing about pills.

"Shit," the chicken wire guy says. "How'd I do that?"

He picks up the french fry basket, cursing.

I let out a long breath that I didn't know I was holding in. I look over at the table where the old man had been. There's no newspaper on it, but I don't remember him taking it with him. I shiver.

Iris gets back and, holy fuck, I feel like blood's running through my veins again. I make damned sure I talk to her. About anything. I think I rattle on about Callie's fascination with some kids' TV show for ten minutes or so, but Iris is smiling again.

She gets a serious, scared little look on her face and says, "Can I ask where Callie's mom is?"

"Sure. She hasn't moved around much lately." I try to laugh. "She's dead. Jenny died when Callie was just a few months old." I know Iris is going to want to know more than that, so I launch into the short version.

"We were in our sophomore year at college when we met. Fell in love. Got married after we found out she was pregnant. Jenny said she'd set out school until I had a good job and the baby was a few years old. We didn't have much money and moved into a run-down apartment building with some weird characters living in it. One day some nut from next door broke in, and Jenny must have fought with him because the place was a wreck. He dragged her out on the street and beat her to death with a piece of copper pipe. There were witnesses. Nobody stepped in. Afraid, I guess."

I stop and focus on the traffic light you can see from the glass front of the grill. It's staining Dodge Street with the only three colors it knows. I watch it turn to yellow and take a deep breath.

"He just walked away after she stopped moving. Went to this bar down the street called Subby's. I got back from class right after the ambulance left. Some old woman told me they'd said Jenny was dead. My Jenny, my girl of spitfire and sweetness."

Iris's eyes are bright, watching me. This time the traffic light paints the street with its palette twice before I can go on. Iris just waits. A willingness to allow some white space in a conversation is rare in a woman. Yellow. Red.

"The old lady described the guy with the pipe. When she mentioned

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this funny long scarf, I knew who it was. The guy wore that everywhere. Even in summer. His door was standing wide open, apartment empty. I took a chance he might be at that bar I'd seen him in a lot. Tried to wrap that scarf so tight around his neck he'd choke. He ran when a bunch of guys pulled me off, but the cops chased him down. I moved back home after that. Bagged groceries in this town that's got one traffic light. And you know what? Shitty things happen there, too."

I refill the sugar caddy that I hadn't even realized I'd been emptying down to the last packet. I stack them back up again. Sugar in white on one side, something that promises it's sweeter than sugar in a pink wrapper on the other. Finally I smile at Iris the best I can. It's not a story I like to tell. But I'm glad it's out of the way.

Iris doesn't say anything even then for a minute. Then she says "God, that's awful, Ute."

We finish up our meal talking about stuff that's safe—kids, work, TV.

She pulls her car into the parking lot at my place, switches off the ignition, and slips her hands around the wheel like she's still driving.

I want her to tell me about the scars on her arms. I don't want to ask. Jenny was so full of life and she was killed. Iris, somewhere along the way, didn't want to live. Nothing makes sense to me. The only peace I ever get is when I admit to myself nothing makes sense and from what I'd studied of history nothing ever has made sense. People keep living and dying in a world where the facts don't add up to a Grand Unified Theory of jackshit.

When you get lucky, though, the facts are pretty, the way Dark Iris was pretty, partly because the old man told me about the dog, partly because Iris was with me, partly because Dark Iris accidentally came in first. But what kind of luck are you having when a jukebox gets stuck on the same song? A hamburger joint gets stuck on the same three minutes while some ugly old geezer dishes out advice you don't want to hear?

"I'm so sorry," Iris says.

"What?" I say.

"About Jenny."

"Well, it was a long time ago," I say. "I'm just thankful Callie was such a little baby that she didn't remember anything."

Iris jangles the keys in her hand and sighs. "Yeah, it's funny how

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memory works. Your cells are supposed to completely change in seven years' time, except for brain cells. So you're carrying around memories of a body that doesn't exist anymore. I read that somewhere." She laughs. "I don't remember where."

A man out walking his dog goes by the car. The dog's sniffing every spot of grass that's been peed on this week and the man's wearing a Walkman. The black cord hangs down his chest like a dropped leash.

"What I don't get, if that's true," she says, "is why scars don't disappear. If cells are gradually replaced, that is, with new ones."

Taking the time to think on that for a minute, I crack my knuckles and then catch myself. Most women I've met would rather listen to their cat hack up a furball than hear a guy make his hands sound like they're breaking. Iris doesn't act like it bothered her. I get the feeling she's this close to telling me about her dance with death if I don't blow it.

I clear my throat. "Maybe the scars are replaced with cells that remember what it is to be scarred. New body, new person, but a history recorded in the skin," I say. "The scars are like home movies, proof that it happened, embarrassing to have somebody else see, but not very important to what you are five, ten years later."

Iris starts taking her bracelets off. "I shouldn't do this. I should wait until I'm sure you like me — "

"I like you, Iris — "

" — before I tell you, but then I'll just dread you finding out."

Bracelets fill the dashboard, and she reaches over my head, flips on the courtesy light. She matches her wrists together, both with their old, wide scars.

"You meant business, huh?" I say.

Her wrists are so small they fit in the palm of my hand.

"I was seventeen and I was mad at the world. My mom had remarried this jerk, I didn't have any friends I could talk to, and nothing looked like it'd ever work out. I did it one night when they went out to dinner, but Mom came back for theater tickets she'd forgotten and decided she had to pee before she left."

"Saved by a full bladder," I say.

Iris starts laughing and covers her mouth with a hand. I want to cover her mouth with mine.

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She sobers up again. "Yeah, I guess I was. Saved. And you're right about the home movie part — because this," she turns her wrists out and up in a motion that's graceful as a swan turning its head, "isn't me anymore."

She sifts through the bracelets on the dashboard until she finds one made out of that blue and black shell. "Give this to Callie for me, would you? Maybe I don't need all these bracelets."

I kiss her on her right ear. It's warm from her hair falling over it, warm like the underneath of a bird's wing. I want to hold her. I don't know how to get from here to where I want to be. But I think Iris is patient. The old man said Iris was my best chance. He was right about Dark Iris crossing the finish line. The odds are better than even, me and Iris can find a way together. It's all in your perspective. How hard can it be? Up close and far away, the little stick figures of the people you love and the people you'd like to kill, the boat and the big sun on the horizon, evil shit and good things, all mixed up on that same sheet of paper like a kid's drawing of reality.

When I get back from walking Shawna home, there's one thing left to do before calling it a night. In Callie's bedroom of little girl frills, I sneak up to her pillow like a thief. Only I'm going to leave the big handful of change and the bracelet Iris gave me for Callie and steal nothing more than a kiss. I slide my hand over the cool sheet, blue in the dark, but white with pink flowers in the light, and lodge the bounty near her head.

Something colder than the fabric touches my palm and my fingers find it. Maybe Shawna hadn't trusted the tooth fairy to do her job tonight and had left a trinket after Callie had fallen asleep.

I pull the thing out, a locket trailing a long chain.

A heart locket.

The street light edging its way around the lacy curtains glints on the silver. Every hair on my head prickles. I slip behind the curtain to see better, wedging the locket open with a thumbnail.

When I'd buried Jenny, she wore a locket like this around her neck. It was the only piece of jewelry I'd ever gotten her aside from her wedding band. She loved it, wore it all the time.

I get the locket open and breathe a sigh of relief — inside was a picture of me and Callie. Not the baby picture of Callie that had been in Jenny's

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locket. A picture of Callie now. Asleep. A beautiful photo. The nightgown has a bow on it, a little worn, a little catty-cornered.

I know it before I lean over to check. I know it. Callie's got on the gown that's in the photo. I've never taken a picture of her in that nightie. I tilt the locket to see the photo of me — I'm in a plaid shirt. I usually am. A big smile. I never smile like that when I got a camera gunning me down. To the side of my head is the white curve of something. It takes me a minute to puzzle it out. Looks like a giant tea cup. The coffee cup billboard at Bluff's Run. My hand is shaking like I've just downed a whole pot of coffee. I manage to pry up an edge of the photo. A tiny inscription is on the back of the white heart — LOVE, THE GODDAMNED TOOTH FAIRY.

For a long time I stand there with my forehead touching the glass of Callie's window, watching nothing happen in the alley, holding that locket like a fat silver ticket.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE DECEMBER ISSUE will take us into our fifty-second year of publication in fine form. Our cover story comes to us courtesy of Albert Cowdrey, who returns to the same milieu we first encountered back in March in "Crux." "Mosh" takes us farther into the future—and then back in time to our near-future—and before it all gets confusing, let it suffice to say that the results are never what you expect when you try to shape history.

For a very different sort of history, next month S. N. Dyer will bring us back to the San Francisco scene of the late 1960s. "Sunrise Blues" examines the fate of a band that once was very popular, and considers whether rock 'n' roll and the undead go together well.

What will 2001 bring? Adventures, capers, yarns, and tales from old contributors and new, among them Amy Sterling Casil, Richard Chwedyk, Carol Emshwiller, Nancy Etchemendy, Harvey Jacobs, and Robert Reed. Keep that subscription up to date so you can be sure you won't miss any of the upcoming issues.

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One of the things Ray Bradbury takes seriously is the matter of using one's talents. When asked years ago what the Eleventh Commandment might be, Mr. Bradbury repeated Polonius's advice to Laertes: "This above all: to thine own self be true." "To neglect God's gifts to you," says the great Mr. B., "is one of the greater sins."

This story came to us with a note from the author that it might have been written to vent some frustration over a real-life model for Simon Cross. Furthermore, the manuscript bore this gentle warning from its author: "Reader, beware. If I ever meet you and ask you what you have done with your genetic talent and you give the wrong answer, I may throw you down the stairs."

Quid Pro Quo

By Ray Bradbury

YOU DO NOT BUILD A TIME Machine unless you know where you are going. Destinations. Cairo after Christ? Macedonia before Methuselah? Hiroshima just before? Destinations, places, happenings.

But I built my Time Machine, all unknowingly, with no destination in mind, no happening about to arrive or, just this second, depart.

I built my Far Traveling Device with fragments of wired together ganglion, the seat of invisible perception, of intuitive awareness.

An accessory to this inner side of the medulla oblongata and the brain shelves behind the optic nerve.

Between the hidden senses of the brain and the probing but invisible radar of the ganglion I ramshackled together a perceptor of future beings or past behaviors far different than nameplaces and mindshaking events.

My tin-lizzie watch, my dust invention had microwave antennae with which to touch, find, and make moral judgments beyond my own intelligence.

The Machine, in sum, would add up integers of human rise and fall

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and mail itself there to shape destinies, taking me along as blind baggage.

Did I know this as I pasted and screwed and welded my seemingly hapless mechanical child? I did not. I simply tossed forth notions and needs, opinions and predictions based on successes and failures and at the end stood back to stare at my useless creation.

For there it stood in my attic, a bright object, all angles and elbows, purring, anxious for travel but going nowhere unless I begged "go" instead of "sit" or "stay." I would *not* give it directions, I would simply at the right time shed my "ambiance," my soul's light upon it.

Then it would rear up and gallop off in all directions. Arriving where, only God knew.

But *we* would know when we arrived.

So there is the start of it all.

A strange dream lurking in a dim attic, with two seats for Tourists, a bated breath and a bright hum of its spidery nerves.

Why had I built it in my attic?

After all, it wouldn't sky-dive midair, but only hang-glide Time.

The Machine. Attic. Waiting. For what?

Santa Barbara. A small bookshop, and my signing a small novel for an even smaller group when the explosion occurred. Which hardly describes the force with which it slammed me back on my inner wall.

It began when I glanced up and saw this old old man swaying in the doorway, dreading to enter. He was incredibly wrinkled. His eyes were broken crystal. Saliva brimmed his trembling lips. He shook as if lightning struck him when he gaped his mouth and gasped.

I went back to signing books until an intuitive cog slipped in my head. I glanced up again.

The old old man still hung there like a scarecrow, framed against the light, his head thrust forward, eyes aching for recognition.

My body froze. I felt the blood run cold along my neck and down my arms. The pen fell from my fingers as the old old man lurched forward, giggling, hands groping.

"Remember me?" he cried, laughing.

I searched the long frazzled gray hair that blew about his cheeks, noted the white chin stubble, the sunbleached shirt, the half-soiled denims, the sandals on his bony feet, then up again to his demon eyes.

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"*Do* you?" He smiled.

"I don't think — "

"Simon Cross!" he exploded.

"Who?"

"Cross!" he bleated. "*I* am Simon *Cross*!"

"Son of a bitch!" I reared back.

My chair fell. The small crowd fell back, too, as if struck. The old old man, riven, shut his eyes, flinching.

"Bastard!" Tears leaped to my eyes. "Simon Cross? What have you *done* with your life!?"

Eyes clenched, he lifted his gnarled and shivering hands, palms out, horribly empty to wait for my further cry.

"Sweet Jesus," I said. "Your life. What *did* you do to it?"

With a great thunderclap my memory reversed to forty years lost, forty years gone, and myself, thirty-three, at the start of my own career.

And Simon Cross stood before me, nineteen years old and handsome to the point of beauty with a bright face, clear and innocent eyes, an amiable demeanor, his bones relaxed within his flesh, and a bundle of story manuscripts under his arm.

"My sister said — " he began.

"I know, I know," I interrupted. "I read your stories last night, the ones she gave me. You're a genius."

"I wouldn't say that," said Simon Cross.

"I would. Bring more stories. Without looking I can sell every one of them. Not as an agent, but a friend to genius."

"Don't say that," said Simon Cross.

"I can't help myself. Someone like you lives once in a lifetime."

I riffled through his new stories.

"Oh, God, yes, yes. Beautiful. Sell them all, and take no commission."

"I'll be damned," he said.

"No, blessed. Genetically blessed, by God."

"I don't go to church."

"You don't *need* to," I said. "Now, get out of here. Let me get my breath. Your genius is blasphemy to plain dogs like me. I admire, envy, and almost hate you. Go!"

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And he smiled a bewildered smile and got out, left me with his white hot pages burning my hand, and within two weeks I had sold every one of these tales by a nineteen-year-old man-child whose words walked him on water and flew him midair.

The response quaked the earth across country.

"Where did you find this writer?" some said. "He reads like the bastard son of Emily Dickinson out of Scott Fitzgerald. You his agent?"

"No. He'll need no agent."

And Simon Cross wrote a dozen more stories that leaped from his machine into print and acclaim.

Simon Cross. Simon Cross. Simon Cross.

And I was his honorary father, visionary discoverer, and envious but forgiving friend.

Simon Cross.

And then, Korea.

And him standing on my front porch in a pure salt-white sailor's suit, his face still unshaven, his cheeks sunburnt, his eyes drinking the world, a last story in his hands.

"Come back, dear boy," I said.

"I'm not a boy."

"No? God's forever child then, burning bright! Stay alive. Don't become too famous."

"I won't." He hugged me and ran.

Simon Cross. Simon Cross.

And the war over and the time lost and him vanished. Spend ten years here, thirty there, and just rumors of my wandering genius child. Some said he had landed in Spain, married a castle, and championed dove shooting. Others swore they had seen him in Morocco or Marrakech. Spend another swift decade and jump the sill into 1998 with a Travel Machine treading useless waters in your attic and all Time on your hands, and book-signing fans pressed close when cracking the silence of forty years, what?!

Simon Cross. Simon Cross.

"Damn you to hell!" I shouted.

The old old man railed back, frightened, hands shielding his face.

"Damn you!" I cried. "Where have you been? How have you used

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yourself? Christ, what a waste! *Look* at you! Straighten up! Are you who you *say* you are?"

"I — "

"Shut up! God, you stupid nerveless monster, what have you done to that *fine* young man!"

"What fine young man?" the old old one babbled.

"You. You! *You* were the genius. You had the world by the tail. You wrote upside down backwards and it all came right! The world was your oyster. You made pearls. Christ, do you *know* what you've *done*?"

"Nothing!"

"Yes! *Nothing!* And all you had to do was whistle, blink, and it was *yours!*"

"Don't hit me!" he cried.

"Hit you? Kill you, maybe! Hit you! My God!"

I looked around for a blunt instrument. I had only my fists which I stared at and dropped in despair.

"Don't you know what life is, you damned idiot fool?" I said at last.

"Life?" gasped the old old man.

"It's a deal. A deal you make with God. He gives you life, and you pay back. No, not a gift, a loan. You don't just take, you give. *Quid pro quo!*"

"Quid — ?"

"Pro quo! One hand washes the other. Borrow and repay, give and take. And you! What a waste! My God, there are ten thousand people out there who'd kill for your talent, who'd die to be what you were and now aren't. Lend me your body, give me your brain, if you don't want it, give it back, but my God, run it to *ruin*? Lose it forever? How could you? What *made* you? Suicide and murder, murder and suicide! Oh damn, damn, damn you to hell!"

"Me?" gasped the old old man.

"Look!" I cried, and spun him to face a shop mirror and see his own shipwreck. "Who *is* that?"

"Me," he bleated.

"No, that's the young man you lost! Damn!"

I raised my fists and it was a moment of stunned release. Images knocked my mind: Suddenly the attic loomed and the useless Machine waiting for no purpose. The Machine I had dreamed wondering why, for

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what? The Machine with two chairs waiting for occupants going where?

My fists, midair, froze. The attic flashed in my mind and I lowered my fists. I saw the wine on the signing table and took it up.

"Were you going to hit me?" the old old man cried.

"No. Drink this."

He opened his eyes to the glass in his hand.

"Does it make me larger or smaller?" he said, inanely.

Alice down the rabbit hole with the DRINK ME bottle that grew her outsize or dwarf small.

"Which?" he said.

"Drink!"

He drank. I refilled the glass. Astounded at this gift confounding my fury, he drank and drank a third and his eyes wet with surprise.

"What?"

"This," I said, and dragged him half crippled out to the car and slung him in like a scarecrow and was off down the road, myself grimly silent, Simon Cross, the lost son of a bitch, babbling.

"Where?"

"Here!"

We swerved into my front drive. I yanked him inside and up attic without breaking his neck.

We stood, imbalanced, by my Time Machine.

"*Now* I know why I built it!" I said.

"Built what?" cried Simon Cross.

"Shut up. In!"

"An electric chair!"

"Maybe! Jump!"

He jumped and I locked him in place and took the second seat and threw the control lever.

"What?" said Simon Cross.

"No!" I said. "*Where!*"

Swiftly, I hit the tabs: year/month/day/hour/minute and just as swiftly: state/town/street/block/number and yanked the backward/ turn/ backward bar.

And we were off, dials spinning, unspinning suns, moons, and years until the Machine melted to silence.

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Simon Cross, stunned, glanced around.

"Why," he said, "this is *my* place."

"Your home, yes."

I dragged him up the front walk.

"And there, yes, there, do you see?" I said.

On the front porch, in his sunbright sailor suit, stood the beautiful young man with a clutch of story pages in his hands.

"That's *me!*" cried the old old man.

"You. Simon Cross."

"Hello," said the young man in the fresh white sailor's suit. He scowled at me, curious, then puzzled. "Hold on. Why do you look — different?" He nodded at his older self. "And who's *this*?"

"Simon Cross," I said.

In silence, youth looked at age, age looked at youth.

"That's not Simon Cross," said the young man.

"It *can't* be me," said the old one.

"Yes."

Slowly both turned to look at me.

"I don't understand," said Simon Cross, nineteen years old.

"Take me back!" the old man exclaimed.

"Where?"

"To where we were, wherever that was," he gasped, wildly.

"Go away." The young man backed off.

"I can't," I said. "Look close. This *is* what you will become after you've lost yourself. Simon Cross, yes, forty years on."

The young sailor stood for a long moment, his eyes searching up and down the old man's body and fixing on his eyes. The young sailor's face reddened. His hands became fists, relaxed, became fists again. Words did not convince, but some intuition, some power unseen, an invisible vibration between the old man and himself.

"Who are you, really?" he said at last.

The old man's voice broke.

"Simon Cross."

"Son of a bitch!" cried the young man. "Damn you!"

And struck a blow to the old man's face, and then another and another and the old man stood in the rain, the downpour of blows, eyes shut,

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drinking the violence, until he fell on the pavement with his young self astride him staring at the body.

"Is he dead?" he wondered.

"You killed him."

"I *had* to."

"Yes."

The young man looked at me. "Am I dead, too?"

"Not if you want to live."

"Oh God, I do, I *do*!"

"Then get away from here. I'll take him with me, back to where we came from."

"Why are you doing this?" said Simon Cross, only nineteen.

"Because you're a genius."

"You keep *saying* that."

"True. Run, now. Go."

He took a few steps and stopped.

"Second chance?" he said.

"Oh, God, I hope so," I said.

And then added, "Remember this. Don't live in Spain or become the champion dove shooter in Madrid."

"I would never be a champion dove shooter anywhere!"

"No?"

"No!"

"And never become the old old man I must drag through Time to meet himself?"

"Never."

"You'll remember *all* this and *live* by it?"

"It's remembered."

He turned and ran down the street.

"Come," I said to the body, the scarecrow, the silent thing. "Let's get you in the Machine and find you an unmarked grave."

In the Machine, I stared up the now empty street.

"Simon Cross," I whispered. "God speed."

And threw the switch and vanished in the future.

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Alex Irvine's first story for us was "Rosetti Song" earlier this year. His new one is a compelling story that, like James Morrow's "Auspicious Eggs," examines the decisions we make for those too young to choose for themselves.

Mr. Irvine and his wife Beth live outside of Boston where they are pursuing careers in academia.

Intimations of Immortality

By Alex Irvine

NORMAN CAMPBELL STOOD on a saddle of land between two mountain peaks on the Continental Divide and recited part of a poem.

But there's a Tree, of many, one,
A single Field which I have looked upon,
Both of them speak of something that is gone:
The Pansy at my feet
Doth the same tale repeat:
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Norman had once killed a man to avoid doing the very thing that he was going to do that morning. It was his son Sasha's eighteenth birthday. Nobody understood Wordsworth who hadn't read him aloud from the top of a mountain.

I must make the right decision, he said to himself.

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* * *

"Dad," Sasha said when Norman came back to the camp they'd set up three days before. A stream, swollen with snowmelt, rushed past them on its way down what the maps still called Herman Gulch. Two miles downstream, Interstate 70 still split the Rocky Mountains; Norman's stomach rolled over at being so close to civilization. Sixteen years, he thought.

"Son." Norman sat by the campfire and spooned himself a bowl of stew. "Happy birthday."

Sasha squatted by the stream to rinse his own bowl. Norman could see the kid wanting to ask a question. He ate stew and waited for Sasha to work himself up to it.

"Are we going down the mountain today?"

The right decision, Norman thought again. "Yes," he said.

Sasha didn't look at him. "Will they arrest you when we get there?"

"I'd be real surprised if they didn't."

2

A little less than nineteen years before that morning, Norman Campbell had been, if not the happiest man in the world, certainly the most immediately content. It was Friday night. Norm's account was swollen with his week's wages, his head was perfectly fogged with Coors, and the balls on the scuffed and chalk-smeared pool table obeyed his every command. He was twenty-four years old, and there was no place in the world he would rather have been than the Valverde Country Club on West Alameda in Denver, Colorado.

"Hey, Crash," Terence called from the table. "You got this one?"

"I got 'em all," Norm said, and rolled the eight down the rail, slow and easy as a Cadillac in the mag-lane of the Valley Highway. It dropped into the corner and Norm came back to the table to pay the waitress for the fresh pitcher.

"Bet you wish you could drive like you shoot pool," Terence said. Beer foam clung to his bushy red Santa Claus-style beard.

"Shit," Norm said. The accident had been three months before, and he'd long since paid it off. "Bet you wish you could fuck like I shoot pool."

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Matt and Bill Amidor, brothers who worked in the office-supply warehouse Norm and Terence drove out of, roared. Terence wiped at his beard to hide the fact that he was grinning too, then he said, "Hey. Look what just walked in the door."

They all looked. Bill whistled. Norm overfilled his mug and stepped back from the table to let the foam run onto the floor. "Good impression you're making there, Crash," Terence said. "You clip rental trucks in the yard, spill your drink whenever a pretty girl walks in...what's next, you gonna spit on the boss's shoes? Quote Shakespeare at him while you do it?"

"Fucking boss needs his shoes spit on," Norm said, but his attention stuck to the woman who now stood at the bar. Tall, long black hair, long black coat that cost more than Norm made in a month, face crying out to have a poem written about it. "Bet she's on the T," Norm said.

"Mm," Bill said. "A little too perfect, isn't she?"

Matt lit a cigarette. "What's she doing here?" It was a good question. The Country Club wasn't exactly dangerous, but even Norm — since he'd never been in jail more than overnight and had a tendency to read books once in a while — was a bit out of place there. This woman was a walking pearl in a pigpen. And, unless they'd all missed something, she was alone.

Oh, no she wasn't. Here came her friends: three equally perfect, perfectly beautiful, and beautifully incongruous young women. Like vid models after a day shooting, Norm thought, but the only place around here that used live vids was the porn shack around the corner, and no woman who looked like these would come anywhere near that place.

"Slumming," Matt grumbled. He liked to go to upper-class bars and light cigarettes just to get kicked out, but he hated it when his favorite dives were invaded by people who normally wouldn't look at him on the street. "Go talk 'em up, Crash," he said. "Recite poems, take 'em home, and piss all over 'em."

"Bitter, bitter," Norm said, but Matt had gotten it two-thirds right. Recite poems, take 'em home. It worked if you weren't too smarmy about the poems.

His next opponent called out from the pool table and he went back to win number fifteen. He won easily enough, but he could tell that his invincibility was ebbing; too much time looking at that first woman out

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of the corner of his eye. Norm decided that she was on the T for sure. She looked about twenty-five, but she didn't carry herself like she was fresh out of college. There was an assurance, a...he didn't know how to pin it down, but he would have bet his job that she was quite a bit older than she looked. Waiting for the next game to start, he debated asking the guys what they thought, but Matt would just start in on one of his eat-the-rich diatribes. Telomerase therapy was so expensive that practically nobody could afford it, and Matt wanted to be immortal as much as the next guy.

Except Norm. Live forever? Sounded like a nightmare to him. He'd probably see a hundred anyway, and that seemed like enough to him. As it was, he doubted he'd recognize the world in his old age.

But was that really true? Here it is, halfway through the twenty-first century, Norm thought, and all the old tensions are alive and well. It's amazing how nobody ever predicts that the future will be exactly like their present. He broke again, was lucky to sink a ball because of a rack loose enough that it sounded like maracas when he hit it, and was struck by the idea that a hundred years ago, bars were probably full of guys shooting pool after an evening of loading office furniture and paper onto box trucks. Like him, they probably didn't do their runs on Fridays, coming in on Sunday night instead when there were fewer drunks on the roads. It was snowing outside, and Norm was glad he didn't have to go to Cheyenne.

One difference, though, between the nineteen fifties and now — let alone desegregation, VR, electric cars, the Water Crisis, and whatever else — was that back then, young women who went slumming weren't immortal.

The Greek gods coming down to Earth, Norm thought. Zeus sowing his wild oats, Apollo chasing Daphne through the forest. He caught himself. Were they really that far apart, people on the T and the rest of the world?

The four women sat in a corner booth by the fire exit. They watched TV, joked with each other — probably sniggering about a bar that doesn't have terminals at every table, Norm thought. He missed his next shot, pool invincibility clearly slipping away, and realized that deep down he was more sympathetic to Matt Amidor than he'd thought. He looked at his three friends, laughing and waving their arms, finishing the pitcher he'd just bought. Well into a Friday night.

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This is not so bad, Norm thought. I like my job, I like my friends, I make enough money to have some fun, and the world is full of pretty women. Who needs immortality?

Still, when the brunette immortal bought him a beer, Norm found himself as much curious as horny.

3

Sasha stayed a little ahead of Norman as they followed the stream down Herman Gulch. No wonder he's excited, Norman thought. Eighteen years old, and for the first time he's about to go into a town during daylight. Norman experienced a flush of pride, thinking that in twenty-first-century America, a nation of three hundred eighty million people, he'd managed to raise a son who was completely at home in the real world of trees, stone, and water.

Not that he'd stunted the boy. The battered terminal with its solar attachment and VR headgear had been a pain in the ass to haul around — at least until he'd destroyed it when Sasha was six — but Norman had done it so Sasha would be educated. So he would have some exposure to the world of cities and human society. So he would know about literature, history, government, politics. So he would be able to make an informed choice when the time came for the choice to be made.

They stopped at the last big bend in the trail before it terminated in a dirt parking lot. Sasha's eyes were wide like a deer's as he watched cars whirring up the slope to the Eisenhower Tunnel, and Norman wondered what he was feeling. I've created a real-life Victorian novel two hundred years late, Norman thought. The boy coming back to claim his birthright.

"There's a world up here, and a world down there," Norman said. "We're going back down there, but you have to take this world with you when you go. Cycles, Sasha. That's a world that's lost track of its cycles."

Sasha nodded, his eyes still on the line of cars.

"You know why I did this, don't you, son?" Norman wished he hadn't said it. They'd been over this a million times. But a man had to make sure his son knew...what? Why he'd had to pretend he was just out backpacking on the few occasions they'd met other people in the Rocky Mountain wilderness? Why he'd seen his father stab a man to death when he was six

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years old? Why he'd never been able to play on a soccer team, take a vacation to California or the Moon, date girls?

Norman forced himself to calm down. Never mind what Sasha's thinking, he thought. You'd better take care that you don't have a heart attack when you walk down into Georgetown.

But that was ridiculous. He was forty-three years old, and in better physical shape than most Olympic athletes half his age. What Norman Campbell had to worry about was his mind. In sixteen years of living in the wilderness, he'd developed an aversion to civilization so profound that to call it pathological would be charitable. Even now, before he'd spoken to a soul or set foot on concrete, it was all he could do not to turn around and disappear.

"I know why you say you did it," Sasha said.

Norman sat next to him. "Sounds like there's more you have to say," he said, and was suddenly afraid.

4

"I was wondering when you'd come over to say hi," the brunette said. "Do you always ignore women who buy you drinks?"

"Well, I was kind of on a streak there," Norm said.

"Mm," she said, the beginnings of a smile in her eyes. This is a woman who likes to play games, Norm thought. "Superstitious?"

"It's pool," Norm said. "You get it going, you don't want to do anything to screw it up. Thanks for the beers." She'd bought him three.

"You're welcome." The brunette put her chin in her hands and looked up at him. "What's your name, pool shooter?"

"Norm. What's yours?"

"Melinda. And these are Licia, Quincy, and Michelle."

"My pleasure." Norm raised his beer to them and finished it off by way of a toast.

"Are you going to invite your friends over?"

Norm considered. "Well, I could, but Matt there has a problem with rich girls on the T."

Melinda smiled, and her friends laughed out loud. "Is that so?"

"'Fraid it is. And I doubt Terence would be able to speak in your

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presence. He's a bit shy around people who aren't as ugly as he is." Well, now, that wasn't very friendly, was it? Norm said to himself. It was true, though; Terence had said as much himself. But there was a difference between being self-deprecating and having someone else do it for you.

Norm stepped back from the table. "I'll get them over here anyway."

"She gonna take you out in daddy's suborbital?" Matt said when Norm came back.

"She just might," Norm said with a grin. "And one of her friends might take you. Come on, the ladies desire company. If your principles permit."

"Shit," Matt said. "It's only the big head has principles." They dragged their table over in front of the fire door. The four immortals already had another pitcher waiting.

5

"What I mean to say, Dad," Sasha said, hesitating over every word, "is...okay. You talk and talk about wanting me to be able to make decisions for myself, but you basically made all of my decisions for me, didn't you? I mean, when you took me off into the mountains. I didn't decide that. My mother didn't decide that. You did. You took away sixteen years' worth of decisions, and you want me to believe that this one moment when I can choose is worth it."

Norman was silent for a while. "We've had this discussion before," he said, mostly to buy time to gather his thoughts.

"And you say the same thing every time. I know, you did what you thought was right."

"It *was* right," Norman said. He floundered, mouth open, wondering what he could say that hadn't already been said. What he could say that would convince Sasha once and for all.

Remember, he told himself. When you have to move a skid of paper, and it's so cold and icy that the pallet jack's wheels won't grip, you break the skid down and horse the paper two boxes per trip. No man can move a ton at once, but just about anyone can do it a hundred pounds at a time. Norman looked at his son, so like himself. A little taller, a little leaner,

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framed more like his mother but with Norman's blond hair and Norman's face.

Sixteen years I've spent trying to teach you, he thought, and now the day my teaching stops, we're back to the very first lesson.

"Your mother," he began.

"No, Dad. I don't want to talk about her. I know her better than you do."

"You haven't — " Norman broke off, unable to speak the question. Had Sasha sent her a message, spoken to her? Left a note in some dumpster somewhere, during one of the winters when weather had forced them closer to the cities?

"No, I haven't talked to her. I haven't sent her Mother's Day cards. But I used to go back to places where you buried newspapers and dig them up to see if I could find the name MacTavish. You'd be surprised; it pops up a lot. I've kept up. I had to. Your only memories of her are older than I am."

"Okay. I see where this is going," Norman said. "You think I'm, what, poisoning your mind against your mother?"

Sasha said nothing.

"You think," Norman went on, growing angry as he always did when the conversation turned to Melinda MacTavish, "you think I would do that? Christ on crutches, kid, that's exactly the kind of thing that I did this to avoid. You better believe that if you'd grown up with her, she'd have made sure that you didn't even know who I was. She'd have had you believing that you were modeled in a lab and then turkey-basted into her, and your dear old dad would have gone on with his life not even knowing you existed."

Sasha was looking at him. Norman stopped. "See what I mean?" Sasha said.

Why doesn't he understand? Norman thought. He shrugged because it was either that or smack the kid down the hill, and after Ivan Klos he'd sworn never to lay a hand on his son. "Fine," he said. "You can't tell the difference between truth and sour grapes, there's nothing I can do for you. We might as well stroll on down into...." His voice caught, and Norman swallowed. "Into town. But understand this, Sasha my son: it was pure luck that I ever found out about you at all."

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6

When the Country Club closed down, everyone paired off, Olympian woman with United Supply mortal. "Shall we head downtown?" Melinda said. "I know a place or two."

"Lead on," Matt said. Norm stifled a grin, knowing that wherever Melinda was going to take them at three in the morning, it wouldn't be a place where smoking cigarettes would cause an uproar. Like all the rich, Melinda and her friends knew places that tolerated vice, and tolerance aggravated Matt's sense of injustice more than anything else in the world.

They took the maglev downtown and ended up on the roof of the Republic Plaza, once Denver's tallest building but now just another in a double handful of glass-and-concrete fingers. Things unfolded pretty much the way Norm had figured. Everyone got a little more drunk, and Matt acted like an idiot while Bill tried to calm him down, and Terence sat in the corner all night watching Orion creep across the sky to impale himself on the invisible ridges of Mount Evans, and the girls passed around eyedroppers of something felonious and intensely pleasurable, no doubt formulated in the basement of some startup gentech concern. Norm rinsed his eyes but good, despite his normal reliance on alcohol and the occasional joint to improve his state of mind. After all, rich people could be counted on to have good drugs, couldn't they?

They could. Norm's sense of time, not to mention any and all misgivings he'd had about mingling with a crowd of immortals (everyone had heard the stories about them playing lethal jokes on those whom they'd come to call "short-timers," as if immortality was one long war and they were already envious about mortals' ability to get sent home, and even though you couldn't trust the Urban Legend nets Norm had no desire to wake up splattered on the pavement with parameds scraping him into a bag for transport to a T-therapy clinic to see just how good the process really was), evaporated like the predawn rain from Republic Plaza's rooftop dome.

"So," Norm said eventually, "what's it like knowing you'll never die?"

Melinda arched one of her perfect eyebrows. Reflected light from the holos playing across the dome glowed on her face. "What's it like knowing you will?"

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Norm laughed. "Okay, right. I don't think about it all that much. But still, you must...." he waved one hand, and beer spilled into a potted yucca plant, blooming like crazy even though it was already September outside the dome.

"Come on, Norm, it's not forever. Nobody knows how long. It's not immortality." Melinda smiled over her drink. "And don't ask how old I am."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Norm said, but having brought the subject up, he couldn't let it go. "'Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood,'" he quoted, "'than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being.' Close enough, right?"

"Other than the fact that I'm not a child, sure. Who is it?"

"Wordsworth. He was — "

"Please, Norm. I went to college. I know who Wordsworth was, and I'll bet that isn't actually a poem you quoted. Sounds too prosey." Norm nodded. "I'd even be willing to bet," Melinda went on, "that he was talking about," she tapped a finger on the edge of her glass, "either the *Prelude* or the 'Intimations' ode, right?"

"A literary woman," Norm said, surprised. "It's the 'Intimations' ode." Most of the filthy rich college students he'd known had gone out of their way not to learn anything, relying instead on net tutors and Norton subliminals. It was nice to find an exception.

Of course, then Melinda had to squash his sudden magnanimity toward the rich. "I wouldn't have figured a truck driver would quote Wordsworth."

"I wouldn't have figured a rich girl on the T would take a guy out just to remind him that he drives a truck," Norm said slowly.

Melinda laughed. "Look at yourself, so defensive. Insult me if you want to, Norm, but remember this: if you could get on the T, you would. It's not my fault the therapy's expensive."

"Two things," Norm said, getting angry even as he reminded himself that he didn't want to be any more like Matt Amidor than he had to. "First, no I wouldn't. And second, I don't care whose fault it is that the T is expensive; it still pisses me off."

Melinda had stopped listening after the first. "You wouldn't?" she said incredulously. "Come on. Of course you would."

"No," Norm said stubbornly, "I wouldn't."

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"Well, then." Melinda plucked a drink from a passing waiter's tray. "Nothing more to say about that, is there? I think you're in a minority, though. I don't know anyone who's had the chance to get on the T and turned it down. I sure wouldn't."

She produced an eyedropper, incredibly, from her cleavage, drawing out the motion to be sure that Norm's gaze followed her hand. "Your grin is looking a little strained, driver man. Look, we both know why we're here. Do you really want to bog everything down in arguments about social injustice?"

Norm forced his attention away from her breasts' perfect dusting of freckles — like a constellation really, or was her neckline a cipher drawing his attention down? — long enough to take the eyedropper. Don't want to be Matt, he thought, but he did wonder: why, he wanted to ask her, *are* we here? Really?

But there was no point, and my, those freckles. "You win," he said, tilting his head back. "Let's have a good time."

And so it was that around sunrise, Norm found himself fifty thousand meters above the Continental Divide in a robot suborbital, Melinda's heels bruising his lumbar vertebrae while they cruised over the San Juans. He laughed out loud, both from residual eyedropper goodwill and at the realization that Matt Amidor's sour prophecy had come to pass, from poetry quoting to suborb ride. Matty, he thought as Melinda laughed with him, I hope you're doing the same. Just don't piss on anybody.

By noon, he was sitting in the old White Spot just south of the Golden Triangle, watching cars whine down Broadway and suffering an eyedropper hangover of apocalyptic intensity. His head hurt; his balls hurt; the inside of his cheek hurt where she'd sampled him just as the suborb hit a little bumpy air; and he'd done something to his neck earlier, so even swallowing bites of *huevos rancheros* hurt. I never did get her last name, Norm thought, and chuckled. He couldn't decide whether that was a good thing or not.

7

Sasha didn't understand. Norman could see it in the boy's expression, in the rigidity of his shoulders, in the way he looked at the gravel surface

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of the parking lot instead of the mountains and sky as he usually did. He didn't look at Norman as they waited by the side of the freeway, thumbs out. After a while a car stopped and they got in, Norman awkwardly shoving the unstrung bow in ahead of him.

"I can take you as far as Idaho Springs," the driver said. He was young, midway between Norman's age and Sasha's. Probably not a sales rep; the car was too clean. Did he work for one of the ski resorts? Could just be visiting family, Norman thought.

"Idaho Springs is great," he said.

"Name's Gavin Dix," the driver said. Sasha introduced himself and, when Norman didn't say anything, said, "Sorry. My dad gets carsick."

Well done, kid, Norman thought. He had to try very hard not to vomit once the car was moving. It was like you lost the skill of seeing the world go by so fast. He'd had Sasha take virtual rides in cars, trains, suborbs, whatever other machines moved people around the world, but Norman hadn't wanted to take them himself. When he'd left, he'd really left. And now, coming back, he fully expected his return to kill him. One way or another.

He closed his eyes and tried not to feel the concrete flying by under the car. Choices. I leave the mountains, Norman thought, for my son's sake. Just as I went to them for his sake. He remembered what Melinda had said to him, the last time they'd spoken: *Your son will live for hundreds of years. He'll be a piece of you in the world long after you're gone.* He hadn't been able to answer her then, eighteen years before, and the only solace he could find now was Wordsworth: *We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind.* Wordsworth had been wrong about that, though. What was left behind didn't always give strength. After Idaho Springs was just Floyd Hill, and then the long slope down to Denver and the plains. Eyes closed, weakening, he whispered to himself as the car whirred past the Route 40 exit. "O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves," he whispered, his voice like the muffled sound of tires on pavement, "Forebode not any severing of our loves."

Like Wordsworth, though, Norman knew that saying didn't make it true. It didn't even mean that the speaker believed it.

Gavin Dix pulled off at the western Idaho Springs interchange. "I'm headed up into the Mt. Evans wilderness. Meeting my girlfriend." He winked. "How far you going, anyway?"

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Norman opened his mouth, but Sasha jumped in. "Denver, eventually. But this is probably far enough for today, right, Dad?"

"You can get the maglev from here right downtown," Gavin said. "Here, I'll drop you off at the station." He eased the connector pedal down and the car rolled forward.

"No," Norman rasped. Gavin looked back at him and he raised one hand. Saw that it was shaking. "What I mean to say is thanks. But I think I need to walk for a bit." He saw the look that Gavin gave Sasha — *the old man all right there*? — but he didn't care. All he wanted to do was get out of the car. Get the whole business over with.

"Yeah," Sasha said. "Like I said, he gets carsick. Thanks for the ride."

Then they were out of the car watching Gavin Dix charge up the road toward Mount Evans. Not a Victorian novel, Norm thought. At least not for me. More like Rip Van Winkle, or — he chuckled bitterly — Tarzan dragged off to London. Once he'd lived in a city, but those memories now seemed to have happened to someone else. His eyes no longer knew how to look at bricks and concrete; his nose had forgotten how to smell paint, rubber, the occasional whiff of propane or gasoline. And the memories were no consolation.

"What's funny?" Sasha said.

Norman shook his head. "Let's head into town."

8

Six months after he'd spent the night in the company of immortals, Norm sat at the White Spot's counter just before five-thirty in the morning. It had been a long night, heavy snow from Greeley all the way up to Cheyenne, and fatigue whined in his head as he paged through the *Denver Post*'s print edition. Strikes on the asteroid colonies, resettlement of Water Crisis refugees, Kasparov beating Capablanca in the Inter-Era AI chess championship, qualifying for the 2054 World Cup. Coming to the back of the entertainment section, he dropped a forkful of potatoes and chili on a picture, wiped it away, and saw Melinda's face looking back at him. Next to her, the other three women from the night at the Country Club smiled their best society-immortal smiles. "Huh," he said, grinning

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as he remembered her freckles, and read the caption. And dropped another forkful of food.

Pregnant? Norm looked back at the picture. "I'll be goddamned," he said.

She'd done it on purpose, had to've. Synchronized her period or something, and gone out to piss off her dad.

But why? What kind of perverse fucking immortals' game was this?

Despite energetic speculation about the father's identity, no clear candidates have emerged, the accompanying article read. *And Ms. — soon to be Mrs.? — MacTavish remains coy, saying only that she's giddy about prospective motherhood. Sources place the due date sometime in the middle of June, just in time to celebrate wedding vows if any are in the offing.*

"Unbelievable," Norm said. He counted back, and there it was. Arithmetic didn't lie.

He was going to be a father. Melinda MacTavish, of the MCT Research MacTavishes, the MCT Tower MacTavishes, the vids-taken-with-the-President MacTavishes, was going to bear his child.

Knowing her last name, Norm didn't have much trouble tracking Melinda down, and the next weekend he caught up with her outside a benefit for the Denver Dumb Friends League. "Hey," he said, and she looked right through him, walking on to a waiting limousine. He stepped in front of her, and a cluster of net stringers appeared from nowhere.

"Hey yourself," the limo driver said. He grabbed Norm's arm.

"It's okay, John," Melinda said. "Take a ride, Norm?"

The driver scowled at Norm, but stepped back and held the door while they got into the limo. Melinda moved carefully, scooting across the seat until she found a comfortable spot and sank back against the cushioned armrest. "How have you been?" she said.

Norm ignored the question. "Were you planning to tell me about this?" he asked, nodding at her belly.

"Why? So we could get married? Please, Norm." Melinda took a bottle of water from a small refrigerator set into the wall. "We had a good time. Leave it at that."

"That's — that's my child there," Norm sputtered. "You can't just ignore me. We did that together."

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She drank, set the bottle down. "Norm, we need to get some things straight. First of all, you don't know the child is yours. How do you know what I did the night before we met, or the night after? How do you know I didn't just decide to bear a child and have something worked up in my dad's lab? I could, you know."

"Okay," Norm said. "Is it mine?"

"Yes, it is. Which brings us to the second thing. I can too ignore you, and I intend to do exactly that. You can make noise, go to the nets, do whatever your sense of injustice demands. But nothing will happen; you know that, don't you? Don't take this the wrong way, but my father is one of the richest men in the world. He decides who represents you in Congress, and he decides what the nets decide is news. You better believe they'll ask him whether or not to cover a truck driver's paternity claim against his only daughter. He'll make your claim disappear. He could make you disappear."

Sure, Norm thought. I won't take that the wrong way. They rode in silence for a while. Finally he said, "Why?"

"Why what? I should think you'd have lots of whys."

"Why did you do this? You go slumming for short-timers, working guys you normally wouldn't look at, that much I can understand. But why a kid?"

"What answer would satisfy you? Do you want me to say that it's some decadent experiment, the elite playing with your gene pool? Nature versus nurture?" Melinda drank more water. A frown crossed her face, then a smile. "He's moving," she said.

Norm gaped at her. He? A son. Norman Campbell's son. "Can I feel?" he said, his voice trembling.

Melinda looked at him for a long moment before nodding. "You deserve that much, don't you?" she said. She took his hand, placed it on the right side of her belly.

A small shift, then nothing, then a sharp kick. Norm made a small noise in the back of his throat, and realized he was about to cry. His son shifted again, then the motion subsided.

Melinda picked up his hand, put it in his lap. "Why are you taking this away from me?" Norm said.

She shook her head, the shadow of sadness on her face almost

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believable. "I'm not taking anything away from you, Norm. If you'd never found out, you wouldn't have known there was anything to take away."

Still staring at her belly, Norm said, "But I did find out."

"Yes. I'm sorry. Think of it this way. Your son will live for hundreds of years. He'll be a piece of you in the world long after you're gone. I thank you for giving him to me."

His son would live for hundreds of years, Norm thought. His son would be immortal.

Whether he wanted to or not.

The limo cruised to a halt. "I should let you off here," Melinda said. "I know you're angry, Norm, but Sasha will have the best of everything. Isn't that what every father wants, for his children to grow up in better circumstances than the father had? I didn't do this randomly, Norm. I looked for quite a long time before I chose you."

Sasha, Norm thought. His son's name was Sasha.

"You're right about one thing," Melinda went on. "Most of the people I know who are on the T, I wouldn't let them within ten feet of my uterus." Her forehead wrinkled. "Does that answer your question? At least in part?"

The driver opened the door. When Norm didn't move right away, he reached in and laid a hand, hard, on Norm's shoulder. Norm got out and the driver walked him firmly to the sidewalk, then went back to the limo and drove away.

Sasha. Not what he would have chosen, but a good name.

It was Saturday night. Terence and Bill and Matt would be at the Country Club. Norm stood on the downtown sidewalk for a long time as people walked by and thin clouds passed across the face of the moon. After a while he got on the maglev and went down to the warehouse, where his loaded truck was parked. Seven hours later, when he got back from his loop through Greeley and Cheyenne and Fort Collins, he went to the White Spot. When he paid for his *huevos rancheros,* he saw that the balance in his account had been multiplied by a factor of one hundred.

That was when he decided to kidnap his son.

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9

They walked together over the freeway overpass, Norman's feet bewildered by the flatness of the road. At the first intersection in town, a service station faced a little café next to a ski and bike store. An old man in coveralls stood on a ladder screwing a sign into the wall over the service station's garage: WATER SEPARATORS SERVICED HERE. Water separators, Norman thought. The last time I was here, that station still had a gas pump at the end of a row of charging docks.

"Let's get something to eat," Norman said, hoping someplace in town still took cash.

"Yeah." Sasha's eyes were even wider than they had been looking over I-70 from the Herman Gulch trailhead, or down into Georgetown from the Guanella Pass road, wider even than the one afternoon they'd spent sneaking through Air Force holdings to look down at the city of Colorado Springs. Different looking down on a sight and suddenly finding yourself part of it. Sasha's whole face seemed to have expanded somehow, his nose twitching like a rabbit's, to accommodate the torrent of novelty from this one intersection in this one little town.

"Wait'll you get to Denver," Norman said, and they turned down Idaho Springs's main street.

The old BeauJo's pizza place was still there, still dark and open and woody, its walls festooned with customers' napkin artwork. Some things never change, Norman thought, and he fervently hoped it was true. "You take cash?" he asked the hostess.

"We'll take whatever you have," she said, and led them to a table near the old mine shaft in the main dining area. "Something to drink?"

"Water for me," Norm said. Sasha looked over the menu terminal, his eyes dancing as his fingers played over the display. He ordered a citrus soda.

The hostess disappeared into the kitchen. "Careful," Norman told his son. "The carbonation might be a little much."

Sasha shrugged. "If I don't like it, I'll get something else. What does orange juice really taste like?"

That's right, Norman thought. You've only tasted it on the VR. His taste buds stood at attention, remembering the sharp sweetness of

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fresh-squeezed OJ. "It's wonderful," he said. "Maybe you should try it instead of a soda."

Sasha changed his order when their waiter showed up with the drinks. Then he returned his attention to the menu terminal, asking Norman questions about this topping and that appetizer. They settled on a large Mountain Pie with ham, tomatoes, and fresh garlic — all things Sasha had never tasted. "Wow," Sasha said, tasting the orange juice. "Wow."

They ate until neither of them could move, their biggest meal since Norman had brought down an elk the previous winter and they'd spent three days gorging on steaks. Sasha was immediately smitten with cheese, picking it off the pizza slices and eating it by itself before going back to finish off the crust and sauce. Norm, too, found himself tasting the food as if he'd never had any of it before. Amazing, he thought. I used to eat pizza twice a week.

"If this is civilization, Dad," Sasha said with a grin, "I'm not going to mind it at all."

If this was all it was, Norman thought, I wouldn't either.

10

It took Norm two weeks to formulate his plan. At first he'd just had wild ideas about grabbing Sasha and heading for another city — Miami, maybe, where wave after wave of immigration had made South Florida into a patchwork of informal city-states. He could hide there. LA was the same way, but people in LA were crazy after the Water Crisis. Norm had no desire to get shot for using a public water fountain in the wrong neighborhood.

This was the MacTavishes he was talking about, though. If anyone had the resources to find him, they did. Could he get out of the country, head for Asia or South America? Norm didn't know Mandarin, and only had enough Spanish to follow soccer broadcasts when the Anglophone nets were preoccupied with baseball or hockey, but he thought he could get by long enough to land a job. Problem was, there was no way to get through the airports without leaving your name, and more importantly your retinal scans, in a database that Conrad MacTavish would crack open like a peanut shell, civil liberties be damned. Drive to Mexico, hire a

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coyote to get him south of the border? Possible, but all the charging stations refused cash, and if he got to the Rio Grande Norm didn't want to trust his son to coyote ethics. A dilemma.

So there was only one option, really. Fly in the grass. Go under radar. I will take my son, Norm thought, and disappear into the wilderness. There are plenty of places in the Rockies where a man can disappear, and Arizona's practically empty now. Southern Utah. Up in the Cascades.

The next morning, he spent two hundred dollars in a South Broadway used bookstore buying old wilderness-survival manuals, autobiographical narratives of people who had survived extended periods alone in the mountains, and biographies of the great nineteenth-century mountain men. That afternoon, he signed up for a Colorado Free University course on wilderness survival, spending three consecutive weekends in the mountains learning how to distinguish edible plants from poisonous, set snares, find or build shelter, and — most importantly — hunt using concealment and ambush. His job kept him fit, but he bought a bike and started riding back and forth to work instead of taking the maglev from his apartment in Edgewater. During the week, he read all day and ran his route at night, leaning out his truck's window to learn constellations and how they moved across the sky.

This would be a hell of a lot easier, he thought one night while wrestling a fire safe over the doorjamb of an office-supply store in Cheyenne, if I could take a gun. Not to mention GPS gear and two decades' worth of vitamin supplements. And oh yes, a babysitter. Norm had started lurking around new-mother net chats, and they'd given him nightmares about all the things that could go wrong with a baby.

It wouldn't work, though. Gunshots could be heard, vitamin supplements would just expire, and so on. The only way to do this, Norm thought, is to go completely native. Become Jedediah Smith or Jim Bridger. Wear skins, hunt and gather — and raise a son. He felt a deep stab of fear at the realization that his plan could very well kill the son he was trying to...what, save? Not quite. But if the boy grew up among people like Melinda MacTavish, what would he know of the world?

"Pretty thin rationalization, Crash," Norm said to himself. The truth of it was that he was doing this because Sasha was his son, and he deserved to be a part of his son's life. And if that meant he had to spend years

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wandering through mountains and deserts, well, Sacajawea had done it with Lewis and Clark.

Sasha was born on June 9, 2054. In the two years following his son's birth, Norm spent lots of time on the gossip and society nets, getting an idea of where Melinda went with and without him, looking for the time and place when she would leave him alone. The MacTavish estate was out of the question: they had photoelectrics, dogs, human sentries, the whole bit. Likewise one of the many benefits Melinda was taking the baby to; too many people, too many net stringers.

Norm finally settled on swimming lessons. Melinda took Sasha to the Cherry Creek Golf Club's gym once a week, starting when he was about a year old, and Norm took out a membership himself — gym only, no course privileges or AI trainer time. Then one day, when Melinda left Sasha in day care while she took a shower, Norm waited until the provider was preoccupied changing one of her charges and then simply walked in, picked Sasha up, waved at her, and left.

In later years, Norm would spend entire nights looking up at the sky, trying to remember what it had felt like to hold his son in his arms. He could never recapture the sensation, and as he grew older his meditations on that night came to be a sort of timekeeping. Instead of remembering the first time he held his son, Norm would stare up at Ursa Minor thinking of the last time he'd stayed up all night staring at Ursa Minor trying to remember the weight of a tiny child held against his chest.

At the time, though, Norm just walked. He did not run, and he didn't hurry out of the parking lot in his old converted-electric pickup truck. It wasn't until he'd gotten on the Sixth Avenue Freeway that he floored it, and when he got to Grand Junction he walked into a garage run by Mexicans and let it be known in miserable Spanish that he had a truck to get rid of, cheap. They looked at Sasha, still squalling for his mother, and shook their heads. "All right, then," Norm said, and tossed his keys on the floor. "At least give me a lift somewhere." One of the mechanics gave him a ride back east a bit, into the national forest north of Rifle, and then he shouldered his backpack and compound bow, cradled his son in one arm, and struck out into the mountains. It was July 28, 2056, and he had two months to prepare for winter.

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11

Sasha demolished the Mountain Pie in fifteen minutes, chasing it with orange juice. The Coke upset his stomach a little, Norman could tell; he left it alone except for a periodic experimental sip. "Careful there, kid," Norman said. "Too much processed food, you're going to spend your first civilized night in sixteen years puking into a real toilet." Sasha laughed and munched down the last of his crust.

Not him you have to worry about, Norman told himself. He's eighteen, invincible. You're past forty now. The wilderness made him tough, but it beat you down. He could feel those sixteen years in his knees, the soles of his feet, the small of his back. Even the Indians had known to stay out of the mountains in winter, and they'd all lived to be leathery and wise. Norman was leathery, but he didn't feel wise. He felt old. Should have known, he thought. Coming down the mountain to surrender my son. Childbirth and empty-nest syndrome all at once, plus this damn noise. Smells. It was true: you could forget how to live in a civilized society. Even if you remembered how to order a pizza.

"Let's go," he said. "I want to see if I remember something."

The bar was just named Red's. Two antique pinball machines stood against the rear wall by the bathroom doors, and two pool tables occupied a quarter of the floor space, and there was not a single terminal screen on the premises. Red's, Norman thought, made the Valverde Country Club — if it was still around — look sophisticated. The carpet smelled of long-ago spilled beer, and cigarette smoke burned his nostrils. Norman loved Red's immediately.

"Your first beer, kid," he said to Sasha, handing him a stubby brown bottle of Coors with a softly blinking logo. "If you don't like it, that's okay. The second's always better."

Sasha drank, grimaced. Drank again.

Norman drank too, the sharpness of the hops flooding up into his sinuses, making his eyes water, or was that just nostalgia? No way to tell. He set his bottle on a table, dug for change in his pockets and was almost able to forget that he had spent the past sixteen years hiding from the twenty-first century and that he would be in jail before the next sunset.

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"Come on." He caught Sasha's arm. "Time you learned to shoot pool."

Sasha picked up the game quickly, and Norman's shooting eye had suffered from sixteen years' hiatus, but the older Campbell still whipped the younger easily. Sasha took it all in stride, intrigued by the challenge of the game and more often than not distracted by the occasional woman who walked in. After they'd been there for an hour or so, a group of young women clustered around the bar near the pool tables; Sasha quickly lost all of the pool skills he'd acquired. He asked Norman for another beer and they sat.

"So, font of wisdom," Sasha said, "what do I say?"

"What, to those girls?" Norman shrugged and the beer coarsened his speech. "Shit, boy, don't say anything. Last time I did, a chain of events ensued and I became a fugitive from justice."

It was the wrong thing to say. Sasha looked down at the table, his shoulders hunching defensively. What have I done? Norman asked himself, knowing that the answer was as obvious as the question was useless. Knowing that he had condemned his son to years of asking himself what to say, what to do, where to go — that he had made his son a stranger to his own time.

I did the right thing, Norman silently insisted. I did.

12

Norm spent the first three winters, until Sasha was five, hiding out in the cliff dwellings that dotted southwestern Colorado and northern New Mexico. Other than the touristy little square of Mesa Verde National Park, the Four Corners was empty enough that a man could hide. Norm hid in the arroyos, shot deer and snared jackrabbits, learned how to sneak through Mancos and Cortez late at night, stealing from produce trucks when he could and dumpsters when he couldn't. He began to feel a strange empathy with the coyotes who sometimes accompanied him on his foragings.

Sasha learned early on the necessity of silence. Too young to be left behind, he followed Norm through canyons and alleys, piggybacking until he could keep up on foot. Wide-eyed he pointed at the coyotes the way

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other boys his age were pointing out beagles and retrievers in Denver parks.

Summers in the Four Corners were brutal and dry, forcing Norm back up into the high country. He worked his way from the San Juans to the Absarokas, moving every few days whether he'd seen anyone or not, staying under tree cover as much as possible, hiding from every overflying aircraft, worrying at night about the brigades of pursuit that must have been swarming up the slopes of the Rockies after him. The old ghost towns saved his life. Apple and pear trees, grapevines, wild corn; the gardens planted a hundred and eighty years before fed him and his son, and their dried fruits, cached in mineshafts and fault caves, kept them going through the winters after he'd abandoned his southern haunts. It was like living in a post-apocalypse world, having the ability to travel back in time and not doing it. Sasha learned to snowshoe before Norm had a chance to teach him how to read from newspapers stolen out of rest-stop trash cans.

Occasionally, three or four times a year, Norm stumbled across a backpacker. As soon as Sasha was old enough to talk, Norm taught him to tell other people that his name was Billy and that they were from Louisiana. It became a game, and Sasha loved to put on the overbroad Southern accent Norm taught him. He grew disappointed and little-boy sulky when too many months passed without encounters with other people, and during these sulks Norm's own self-interrogations grew more pointed. He's a little boy, Norm thought. He wants to see other little boys, wants to chase the girls around the playground.

Except Sasha had only seen little girls in a picture book stashed in a shelter cave south of Loveland Pass. Norm waited until his son was sleeping, and then he wept.

One morning after such a night, when Sasha was six years old and Norm was thirty, rain kept them from venturing too far from the rocky overhang under which they'd slept. Norm read to him from Shakespeare's sonnets, wishing he had more books in contemporary English. He could only carry so much, though; other than Shakespeare, he had small editions of Wordsworth and three novels: *The Hobbit*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and *Pynchon in Dreamland*. The first two had been favorites of Norm's father. Apparently, Norm often thought, along with taste in literature,

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he'd picked up some of the old man's resentment of the twenty-first century. *Pynchon in Dreamland* was the only exception, and even it was a time-travel novel dragging the great TwenCen novelist into the 2040s, where he disintegrated when confronted with the death of print.

Reading Shakespeare was good for the boy, though, since the dated language kept him asking questions and kept Norm answering them. Questions, Norm believed, were good. Better than hyperlinks that taught you only to select highlighted words. He limited Sasha's terminal time to one hour a day, and encouraged the boy only to use it when he wanted a specific question answered and Norman couldn't or wouldn't answer it. It was irrational, but Norm kept Sasha from reading the books in the terminal's library. He wanted Sasha to grow up believing that books were made of paper and questions were asked of other people before being surrendered to machines.

Questions taught. Questions were good.

Then Sasha looked up from the sonnets and said, "Who's my mother?"

Norm gently took the book from him and closed it. He had been waiting for this, but still was not looking forward to it. "Her name is Melinda," he said.

"Why didn't she come backpacking with us?"

"Sasha, buddy, can you do me a favor? Ask me that again when you're about ten."

"I want to know now, Dad."

"I can't tell you now, son." Norm took a deep breath. "If your mother found out about us up here, she'd take you away from me."

Sasha's forehead creased. He needed a haircut. "Why?"

This was the hard part. "I can't tell you that either, Sasha," Norm said. "Promise me you won't ask again until you're ten."

Sasha didn't like it, Norm could tell. He picked at his moccasins, already wearing through at the toe; scratched at the bridge of his nose, so much like his mother's, blew the hair away from his forehead. "Okay," he finally said.

"Thanks, buddy." Norm wanted to stop there, but with a flash he remembered Melinda saying *He could make you disappear.* "I took you because I love you, Sasha," he said. "If your mom finds out we're up here, I might be killed." He felt something die in himself as he said it, but the

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words went out into the air, found their way into his son's ears, then drifted away to be hammered to bits by the pounding rain.

13

On the maglev platform across I-70 from the Arapaho National Forest ranger station, Norman Campbell stepped up to the retinal scan to charge passage down to Denver. The invisible light played across his eyes, codified its findings, sent them off to the Transportation Department's central processor. Along the way, Norman guessed, the burst of information that represented Norman Campbell was noted by either the Colorado State Patrol or whatever private people were still working for the MacTavishes. Hello, forces of law and order, Norman thought. He stepped back. "Go ahead," he said Sasha. "Give it something to think about."

Sasha looked at him for a long time before approaching the scanner. Probably my accounts are long since seized and he doesn't have any, Norman thought. Either it'll let us on anyway, just so they know where to catch us, or it won't and I can buy some tickets. It'll all turn out the same. Maybe in Golden, maybe in Lakewood, maybe at the Alameda station, they'll be waiting.

Sasha blinked, turned back to face Norman. "Dad — " he began.

"Too late, kid," Norman said. "Let's get on the train."

The maglev accelerated smoothly out of the Idaho Springs station and swept down Clear Creek Canyon. Twenty minutes later it coasted into the 19th Street station in Golden, where eight uniformed state patrolmen were waiting. They were polite and efficient, bonding Norman's wrists firmly but without malice while Sasha was led away by three men in suits. Norman was incongruously struck by how little fashion had changed. "Sasha," he called, "son."

Sasha was looking over his head, at the Denver skyline that towered to the east. He didn't appear to have heard.

14

It was less than three weeks after their rainy-day conversation that Norm and Sasha stumbled across the path of Ivan Klos.

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"Howdy," he called, walking toward them on a ridge somewhere in the Mosquito Range. "Y'all don't have a map, do you? I am purely lost."

Warning prickles tracked up and down the back of Norm's neck. The Southern accent, he thought. It sounds as fake as the one I taught Sasha.

Sasha waved back. "Hi," he called. The man approached, dropped his pack, and sat next to them on the ridge, looking down a broad valley just beginning to lose its early-summer green. "Are you from Louisiana too?" Sasha asked.

"No, Texas. Casey Kenner," the stranger said, and shook Sasha's hand.

Later Norm would be unable to figure out what had set him off. Paranoia, maybe. Too many years, even then, without enough human contact. Maybe the fake-sounding accent. But what always came back to him was the sight of Sasha's tiny hand disappearing into Ivan Klos's knobby, tanned fingers.

Someone else holding onto his son.

Norm drew his knife, leaned forward, and drove it into the side of the stranger's neck just below the hinge of his jaw. Sasha screamed, an impossibly high-pitched and endless sound that lasted as long as it took Norm to jerk the knife out, as long as it took a bright arc of blood to splatter Sasha's arm from the hand that held the stranger's to the collar of his leather shirt, as long as it took for the stranger who was not Casey Kenner to topple over and try to get up again. Norm held him down, pried Sasha's hand out of his, leaned across him and listened to him die.

Sasha's screams subsided into hitching soundless whoops. Norm reached out to him, tried to wipe the blood away from his hand and the side of his neck but found that his own hands were also bloody. "Sasha, Sasha," he said, "breathe. You have to breathe, son." Sasha rocked forward into him and Norm held his son close, sshhing at him until his breath evened out and he started to relax. Norm stood and walked a mile or so down into the valley. He set Sasha down. "Wash your shirt, okay, buddy?" he said. "Wash yourself real good and stay here. I have to go get our stuff."

Back up on the ridge, flies were settling on the dead man. Norm took a deep breath and went through his pockets. The first thing he found was a compass and GPS locator with beacon.

"Purely lost," he said, and crushed the instrument with a rock. "How

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did you find us, you son of a bitch?" In the man's back pocket Norm found a wallet containing an investigator's license identifying him as one Ivan Klos. A holstered gun nestled in the small of Klos's back.

Norm sat back and his hands began to shake. The shakes spread up his arms, into his jaw, into his stomach. He turned away from the body and vomited on the delicate tundra flowers, heaving until threads of blood laced his bile. "I did the right thing," he choked each time he could draw breath. "The right thing."

Eventually his stomach settled and he went back to his search. Klos's backpack contained ordinary camping stuff — stove, dried food, clothing, sleeping bag — and one extraordinary thing as well.

I look like myself, Norm thought stupidly as he unfolded a laminated photograph. It was blown up and enhanced from a softball-team picture; in it twenty-three-year-old Norm Campbell grinned his third baseman's grin, beardless and without a care in the world. This is what I gave up, Norm thought. I threw this over so I could take my son away into the wilderness, so he could grow up not knowing the rest of his family, so he could never know his culture, so he could watch his father kill a man.

So he would know how to live in the world. So he would know what he was accepting, and what he was losing, if he decided to go on the T. So he would be a human being.

He gathered his and Sasha's possessions, set them to one side, and took out the solar-powered terminal he'd used to teach Sasha about governments and genomes. Using the same rock he'd used on Klos's GPS, he smashed it to fragments. When he realized that he'd been growling, "No more chances," with every blow, he dropped the rock and put both hands over his mouth. For a long time he stood like that. Then he gathered up the pieces, put them in Klos's backpack, hooked his elbows under the body's armpits, and dragged the dead Ivan Klos down into the valley. In a clearing he piled dry brush and tree limbs, threw the body on the pile, and burned everything that would burn, stoking the fire to keep it hot.

When nothing but ashes, bones, and metal remained, Norm sifted out the bones, wet and scattered the ashes, and buried everything that hadn't burned. The whole process took four hours, and Norm spent every second scouting the horizon for planes and helicopters. He wouldn't be able to see

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suborbitals, but it was cloudy and they wouldn't be able to see him either. Pray for rain, he thought grimly as he smoothed over Ivan Klos's unmarked grave. Rain and a little luck.

It was dusk before he'd recovered his gear from the ridge and found Sasha by the stream. "Hey, kid," he said, sitting down next to his son.

Nightfall was noticeably closer by the time Sasha responded. "Why'd you do that, Dad?"

"He was looking for us, buddy," Norm said. "Remember what I told you; if they catch us, they'll put me in jail for sure, and — and they might kill me." Norm tasted bile in his throat. *What right do I have to do this to him?*

A father's right. And he has a right to grow up and make his own decisions, not be Melinda MacTavish's damn trophy.

Again Sasha paused for a long time before answering. Night fell around them, recast the stream in moonlight. "Are we ever going to go back?" he asked.

The right thing, Norm told himself. I'm doing the right thing. "When you're eighteen, buddy, we'll go back. We'll go back together."

"Why not 'til then?"

"I can't tell you yet." Norm reached for his son, felt a teary wave of relief when the boy didn't jerk away. "Bear with me, Sasha. I'll tell you everything when I can."

15

On the vidscreen, people in Bangladesh tried to rescue a water buffalo from a rising river. Norm flipped the channel, found a soccer game, settled into his bunk. How easy it was to fall back into old habits.

Already forgetting: the feeling of strength as the right hand draws the bowstring. The peace of sleep in silence. The pure smell of nothing.

Someone scored a goal, and the quick succession of shots that followed — crowd, goalscorer, goalkeeper, crowd, ball in net, defenders standing with hanging heads, crowd, goalkeeper kicking ball back upfield — dizzied Norm. He closed his eyes and could see the purple ghost of the vidscreen scored into his retinas.

Already forgetting: the Milky Way in the dead of winter, seen from

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Guanella Pass. Sunrise over the Continental Divide. Sunset over the Continental Divide.

The look on Sasha's face when he caught his first fish, learned to swim, understood Shakespeare's hundred and twenty-seventh sonnet.

The purity of a poem composed at dawn on a mountaintop, remembered ten years later, taught to one's son on the same mountaintop.

Around him, three concrete walls and one made of steel bars. A low ceiling with a recessed fluorescent light, artificial and uncomfortable. A sink. A toilet. Five books in a corner. An electronic port set low near the door — net jack for prisoners? Or something for jailers? He got a little chill as the word *interrogation* whispered through his mind.

"Stone walls do not a prison make," Norm quoted softly, "nor iron bars a cage." Not Wordsworth. Who? Forgetting, forgetting.

Jail, Norm thought. Prison. This is where they put kidnappers. This is where they put killers. He felt his strength ebbing away. I am a kidnapper. I am a killer, although they don't know that. He debated confessing, decided: *No. I did the right thing.*

16

When Sasha was twelve years old, he had enough confidence to claim that he could just run away back to civilization. It was a moment Norm had realized was approaching, and he'd spent months agonizing over whether to broach the subject himself or let Sasha do it. Ultimately he decided to leave the initiative to his son.

It was very sudden. "Rifle's just ten miles or so southwest of here, isn't it?" Sasha asked one day.

They were tanning a deerskin. Both of them needed moccasins. "Yeah, ten or twelve," Norm answered. In fact, they were even closer to the place where he'd first carried Sasha into the wilderness. "We'll have to head north a ways once we get this done."

"It would only take me one day to get there."

Norm stopped scraping.

A new look creased and tensed in the lines of Sasha's face. "I could do it," he said.

"Yes," Norm said. "You could." He started scraping again. He told

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himself that this was all normal, that testing of boundaries was part of human development, that Sasha was beginning to understand that he could exist without his father around and to desire that existence. Perfectly normal.

But he couldn't breathe through the cold squeeze his son's expression put on his gut. Are you afraid he's going to run off and die? Norm asked himself. Or are you afraid he'll run off and not die, that he'll run back to Melinda and tell her where you've been all these years?

If he was honest with himself, he had to admit both.

"Why shouldn't I go?" Sasha said. "Everyone lives in cities. Why are you so afraid?"

"I told you, kid, when I go back it's straight to the inside of a jail cell." Norm stopped scraping again. "I made you a deal. I'll go back when you're eighteen. Not before."

"You made me a deal when I was six, Dad. That isn't fair. I didn't know."

"Well, now you do."

"What are you afraid of? You can't just be a hermit."

"I'm not. I've got you."

Sasha's face darkened. "Well, I can't just be a hermit."

"Okay, kid," Norm said. "I'll tell you what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid that when I go back your mom's going to make sure I never see sunlight again. I'm afraid that I've forgotten how to live anywhere but here, and I'm afraid that if we go back — when we go back — you're going to forget everything I've tried to teach you. I'm afraid that the world I took you away from is still there, and I'm afraid that it isn't." He tossed his scraper to the ground. "I threw my life away for you, son. I don't expect you to return the favor, but I do expect you to respect the gift."

"What gift?" Sasha shouted, and just like that he was crying. "What gift? I don't know anyone but you. I don't remember ever sleeping in a house. I don't remember my mother. I want to have friends, Dad, I want to go to school, I want to eat chocolate and drink soda pop, I want to read a book that I pick myself, I want to watch vids and surf the nets, *I want to live like everyone else does!*"

"Like everyone else does?" Norm repeated. "What do you think would happen to the average person who had to spend a week in these mountains?"

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Sasha was silent.

Norm knelt and picked a stem of flax. "Look at this flower. You know when it blooms, you know when it dies. You know where it grows and where it doesn't. All of them; you know which you can eat and which you can't. You know where to hunt for deer in April, and where they go in November. You know how to build a lean-to and live in a snow cave. You can smell a mountain lion from farther away than any of them," Norm waved in the general direction of the world, "can smell their own shit. You know the cycles here, *and you're part of them.* You want to live like everyone else? Everyone else has their senses scraped away by living in a place where there's light and noise twenty-four hours a day, where the air and water are full of chemicals you can't see. Everyone else spends their lives trying to make money and please their bosses. Everyone else experiences the world that the vids tell them to experience. You experience the world that is there. That's what I gave you, Sasha. You've got your whole life to be like everyone else. All I'm asking for is these first sixteen years."

Sasha walked away.

Norm sat up that night without a fire, counting shooting stars and trying not to admit that he was praying. Around sunrise, Sasha returned, and that day they struck north and didn't stop until they reached Montana.

17

When he'd been in jail for six days, Melinda came to visit. He'd been wondering if she would, wondering too how she would look. Did the T really work that well? Would she look like his memories?

She did. "You have to disappear, Norm," she said from the other side of the bars. "We'll send you to the colonies if you like. It's all been too embarrassing; the nets got hold of it and now it's everywhere."

"I know." He was following the stories, drinking in the images of his son, hating the images of his son that looked so little like the boy he remembered.

Remembered? he thought. It was only a week ago.

"You're a celebrity," Melinda said.

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"I know," he said, and thought, oh God.

"I'll be honest with you, Norm. My father was hoping some of the people he'd sent after you would just kill you and bring Sasha back. Even now I'm holding him off."

"Why?"

Melinda sighed. "I don't know. There have been enough times when I'd have killed you myself."

"Spring me," Norm said. "I'll disappear. No more celebrity, no more embarrassment."

"Explain to me why I should do you any favors, Norm."

Norm paced quickly around his cell, returned to face her. "Is he going on the T?"

Melinda turned frosty. Norm could see her father in her gaze. "That's up to him now, isn't it?"

"If he does," Norm said, "you'll have him for how long, Melinda? How many centuries is the T good for? You'll have him forever. I just wanted him when he was a boy. He only got to be a child once, and I wanted to show him...I wanted him to know what was real."

"He only got to be a child once," Melinda said, "and you took that away from me."

18

After he'd destroyed the terminal, Norman worked harder to educate Sasha, teaching him the basics of math and science and trying to use unfamiliar words in conversation — *atmosphere, adjective, allele, atom, anthropology* — so the boy would have to ask what they meant. This activity had the desirable side effect of keeping Norm's memory sharp, and for that he was grateful. He'd reconciled himself to spending the rest of his life in prison, starting about six months from right then, but he didn't want to be an idiot too.

Most often, Norm's educational efforts showed up when he and Sasha got into an argument, and this was the case when, in December of 2071, Sasha exercised his vocabulary and called Norm a hypocrite.

They were cheating that winter, staying in the falling-down remains of a cabin deep in the Mount Evans wilderness. With only six months

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before Sasha's eighteenth birthday, Norm found he couldn't help letting his guard down. Part of him wanted to be captured so he wouldn't have to go and turn himself in. After protracted internal arguments, though, he concluded that being captured would tarnish his image as someone who had, out of principle and concern for his son, gone into the wilderness and then come back. If somebody tracked him down and dragged him back in handcuffs, he'd look like just another nut who kidnapped his son.

Which was, more or less, the offense of which Sasha was accusing him. "All this about saving me from civilization is bullshit, Dad," he said. "You were just pissed off at Mom and you used me to get back at her."

Norm counted to three, slowly. "Partly," he said, and stirred the fire. "If your mom had come to me and said, 'Hey, I'm pregnant, let's work something out,' this never would have happened." Saying it, he wondered if it were true. "But there's quite a bit you don't know about this, kid. Let me be blunt: are you going on the T when we get back?"

Resentment flashed in Sasha's eyes. Norm had only told him about telomerase therapy the year before, and Sasha was still angry about having it withheld for so long. It must sound like magic to the kid, Norm thought, not for the first time. He's only seen DNA in a model I built him. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't believe in it.

"I don't have to tell you," Sasha said.

Norm remembered everything his parents had said about teenagers and tried not to get angry. "No, you don't," he agreed. "You don't owe me anything. I deprived you of a normal childhood, of all the girlfriends you would have had before now, of two whole years of driving and sucking in hydrocarbons...." He cut himself off before his sarcasm got too sharp.

"There you go again." Sasha pointed an accusing finger. "I say something, and you drop guilt on me because it's the only thing you have."

"That's where you're wrong, my boy," Norm said. "You are the only thing I have. This is not guilt. This is fact. I threw everything away to give you a chance."

"You threw everything away to give me a chance at something you didn't even know I'd want!" Sasha shouted. "This has been about you from the beginning!"

"Well then, tell me!" Norm snapped. "Did you want it? Do you see what it's worth? Tell me, Sasha. When you go down the hill next summer,

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and you have the rest of your life to do whatever you want to do, are you going to look back when you're fifty, or a hundred, or two hundred years old, and be angry at me because of the way you spent your childhood? Because if you are, boy, go ahead and put on your snowshoes and head right over that ridge to Chicago Lakes. There's a trail there that'll take you right down to a lodge. You leave in the morning, you can have dinner in Denver tomorrow night. I'll wait for the police here." He was shaking with anger, and also with fear that Sasha would go, fear that everything Norman Campbell had done these past sixteen years was not only worthless, but simply and ordinarily criminal.

He could see it all working in Sasha's face: fear of the city, desire for the city; fear of leaving his father, anger at his father; fear of what lay down the hill, fear that he would never see what lay down the hill. The war of the son with the father's shadow and the father's likeness in the mirror.

"You see?" Norm said, more softly. "You're all torn up about it because you've realized that there are alternatives. You can go on the T and live a thousand years, or you can not go on the T and when you're eighty your grandchildren will be able to see you for what you are. Don't you want to know what it's like to be old? Before the T, I never thought I did; now I know better, and I've tried to pass that along to you. God knows I've tried not to preach to you, son, but this is my last chance, so here it is: *you belong in this world.* You don't belong in the world out there where rich people outlive redwoods. Next year, you can either join them, or you can bring this world with you into that one. You can *choose.* Whatever else you might blame me for, son — and I'm sure you've got a list — you could at least thank me for that."

A pause stretched out, broken only by the whistling of wind on the peaks. Norm forgot to breathe. The entirety of the last sixteen years seemed to narrow down to a point that slowly thrust its way into his aging, mortal soul, driven by the weight of a childhood's accumulated guilt and misgivings.

19

The suborbital arced down out of the afternoon sky, ghosting to a landing at the base of the ridge encircling the upper Chicago Lake. A

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couple of fishermen looked up, annoyed at the interruption, as Norm slowly got out, scratched at his cropped beard, and reached back into the suborb's hatch for a tall frame backpack and a compound bow.

He saw himself in the suborb's mirrored window and thought *Old. A man who has been left behind.* Norman Campbell in jail was a celebrity; Norman Campbell in the wilderness was just a hermit. Forgotten. A nut who kidnapped his son.

"Come out and have a visit sometime, son. You know where to look."

"Yeah," Sasha said. Norm looked at him, looked hard, burning him into memory. A line from Wordsworth floated through his head, from what poem he couldn't remember: "the little actor cons another part." Already Sasha looked somehow harder around the edges, his gaze a little less direct, his shoulders a little less straight. The city getting into him, Norm thought.

"You going to go on the T?" he asked. It was clumsy, but Norm was a little stunned by being outside again.

"Don't ask me, Dad. I don't know." Norman kept looking at his son, wanting to believe.

But there was no way to tell.

"Thanks, Dad," Sasha said.

"Thanks?"

Sasha shrugged. "You know," he said.

I wonder if I do, Norm thought. "I'm serious, son. Come find me sometime."

"I will." The suborbital's hatch slid shut and it lifted away. The fishermen went back to casting. Norman Campbell shouldered his pack and stood in the shadow of the mountain, looking back down the valley. After a long while, he turned to his left and began making his way slowly up the side of the mountain, a man without answers.

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CURIOSITIES

LOOKING FOR THE GENERAL, BY WARREN MILLER (1964)

YOU once could find copies of this one everywhere. You can't anymore, and it's a shame.

In the novel, a retired general disappears. His aide sets out to find him. He goes through the general's recent papers and letters, and finds he's been corresponding with just about every nut-cult and proto-New Age crank you could have in those just-post Kennedy Assassination days. Health cranks, cancer quacks, space-brothers; there's a guy who wants to build a tower to the Moon with the help of the Indiana National Guard. The aide realizes Something's Up, and the general's on his way *there.*

The book is somewhere between fabulation, satire, and flat-out warning (the best analogy I can think of is a collaboration between Gabriel García Márquez and the Coen brothers...). It was written in the time of Au + H_2O = 1964 and *Dr. Strangelove.* The hunt for the general becomes a search for what's happening to the U.S. You read it and you begin to think Raymond Chandler was wrong when he said there's nothing the matter with America a 300-foot rise in sea-level wouldn't fix. There is a near-Apocalypse ending.

Miller was best known for his straight novel *The Cool World* (1959) and his one political sf/thriller, *The Siege of Harlem* (also 1964). But in this one, he *was* the avatar of the Zeitgeist. He died in 1966, before most of the things he wrote about in this book came to pass. He caught a whiff of the last third of the century, and it smelled a lot like chaos and burning flesh.

Remember, this was written in 1964, before the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: There's a throwaway scene as the aide's driving out of D.C. on the start of his hunt for the general. He describes the neighborhoods he's passing through: post-WWI renovations, post-WWII tract housing, post-Korean War homes, post-Vietnam War suburbs....

Find a copy of this novel. If you can.

—Howard Waldrop

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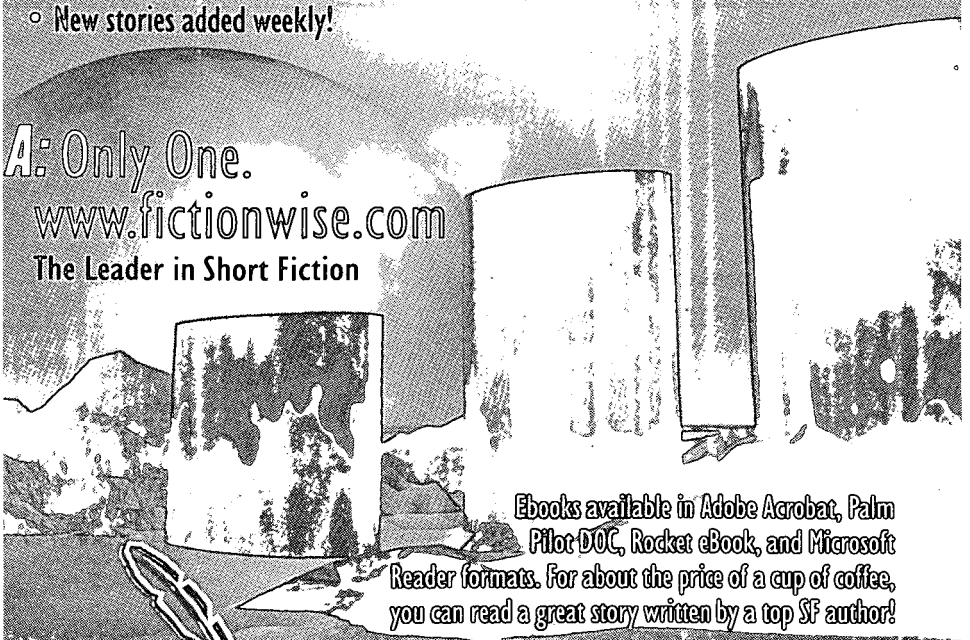

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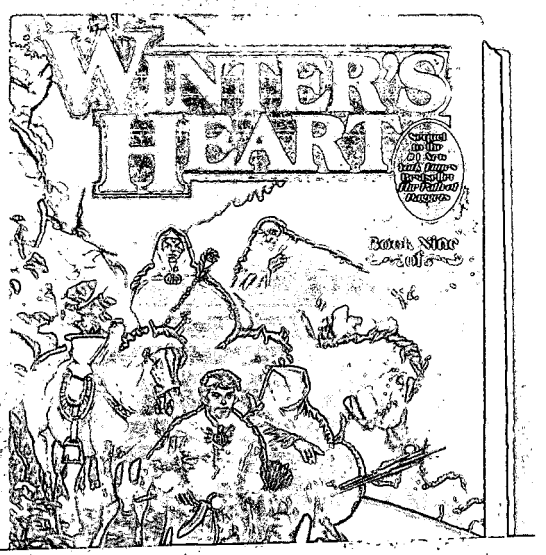

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